# THE INTEGRITY OF THE LATER POETRY OF W.B. YEATS

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This thesis is my own composition.
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## ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations have been used in the footnotes:

C.P. The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats, London, Macmillan, 1963.

E. & I. Yeats, W.B., Essays and Introductions, London, Macmillan, 1961.

P.Y. Hall, J. and Steinmann, M. (editors), The Permanence of Yeats, New York, Collier, 1961.

# INTRODUCTION

## I

> ...the study of Yeats in the coming generation is likely to overdo the scholarly procedure, and the result will be the occultation of a poetry which I believe is nearer the center of our main traditions of sensibility and thought than the poetry of Eliot or of Pound. Yeats's special qualities will instigate special studies of great ingenuity, but the more direct and more difficult problem of the poetry itself will probably be delayed. This is only to say that Yeats's romanticism will be created by his critics.[1]

This prophecy, made by Allen Tate in 1942, has been fulfilled to the letter. Although Yeats has been named consistently among the foremost poets of the century, there has been at the same time a persistent undertone of questioning, directed at the alleged obscurity of his later verse and at the relationship between his poetry and his beliefs. Both are familiar issues in the discussion of modern poetry, but Yeats's "special qualities", his individual style, his symbolism, his growth from the aestheticism of the nineties, and, particularly, his metaphysical allegiances which, as he was well aware, were undeniably esoteric and alien, even bizarre, to many people, combined to produce a distrust of the poems which

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[1] "Yeats's Romanticism: Notes and Suggestions", Southern Review, VII (1941-2), p.600. Also in The Permanence of Yeats, J. Hall and M. Steinmann, eds., 1961, p.105.

has resulted in deflection of critical attention to external, background studies.

The nature of the problem is well illustrated by the comments of R.P. Blackmur on Yeats's poem, "The Second Coming". We receive an adequate general idea of the poem's meaning, Blackmur says, because most of the words are common, but closer examination brings uncertainty. There is "an air of explicitness" about such phrases as Spiritus Mundi,

> and the question is whether the general, the readily available senses of the words are adequate to supply the specific sense wanted by the poem. Put another way, can the poet's own arbitrary meaning be made, merely by discovering it, to participate in and enrich what the "normal" meanings of the words in their limiting context provide?[1]

Both Blackmur's questions are in themselves questionable, but their first interest is simply that they exist, that there is a doubt in the critic's mind that somewhere between the so-called "normal" meanings of the words and the meaning as obtained from the poem there is a gap, and that, in view of the poet's interests and ideas as they appear elsewhere (Blackmur is talking specifically about "magic"), that gap is likely to be a wide one for the general reader. Magic, Blackmur comments, unlike Christianity, has no objective, public, natural-seeming form - it is all mystery.

Despite this doubt, Blackmur's first question implies that it is possible to obtain a "specific sense" which is

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1 "The Later Poetry of W.B. Yeats", in The Permanence of Yeats, p.43. (Hereafter referred to as P.Y.).

"wanted by the poem", and if this is so it seems unnecessary to wonder whether "readily available senses" are adequate, unless there is some gross difference between them. Similarly, his second question assumes that the poet does have his "own arbitrary meaning" for these words, and this touches the core of the problem, for it raises the familiar bogey of intention. Discussing the last two lines of stanza one of "The Second Coming"

> The best lack all conviction, while the worst
> Are full of passionate intensity

Blackmur suggests that there is one meaning but that it is available from two possible sources, one from observation of life as it is, the other from being written at the end of a gyre when the subjective "have lost all faith though desiring it, and the...objective have no need of faith and may be full of 'passionate intensity' without the control of any faith or wisdom". The question to be asked, Blackmur says, is "whether the fact of this double control and source of meaning at a critical point defeats or strengthens the unity of the poem".[1]

It would seem from this ~~statement~~ that Blackmur considers that the poem has, or should have, unity of some kind. But of what kind? If it can be destroyed by the possibility of the poem's meaning having a "second source" lurking in the background, can the unity be said to have any existence? That is to say, if the sense as obtained from the poem is a self-consistent whole ("unity"), how is it possible to destroy this sense by bringing into consideration an external source of information which does

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[1] P.Y., p.45.

not alter the meaning? Either the poem has unity and the meaning can be read from the poem, or it has no unity and the meaning is incomplete without the background reference.

Complex though the concept of meaning may be, the propagation of this kind of confusion can only lead to worse confusion in approaching the poem, suggesting as it does that the external source of information is vital to our understanding of the poem. In this particular instance Blackmur appears to have allowed the background and its strangeness to persuade him from his stated belief that the meaning as obtained from the poem gives a satisfactory whole. But, later in the essay, he distinguishes between the knowledge required by the reader of a poem and that required by the writer, noting that "the poet invariably requires more machinery to secure his effects - the machinery of his whole life and thought - than the reader requires to secure what he takes as the poem's effects".[1] Thus, the poem can be considered to have a unity with respect to the reader, even though its relationship to the writer may be more complex or more esoteric.

But to many critics there is no question of a unity within the poem. They assume that none exists and ask instead whether the meanings obtained from the external, background references unify the poem? That is, they assume, tacitly or otherwise, that the poem represents some kind of personal effusion relating to the poet's life and thought and cannot be considered as a separate entity. In this case, in order to understand the poems it becomes

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[1] P.Y., p.56.

necessary to know as much as possible about the poet and his ideas. F.A.C. Wilson, for instance, declares himself to be seeking "what Yeats meant when he wrote the poems",[1] and adds that he wants "to give a fairly full philosophical background - even sometimes more than appears in the works - because if one says only what is of the first relevance, Yeats's basic religious ideas are likely to seem eccentric in being private and idiosyncratic - which they aren't".[2] That is to say, Wilson considers that in the poems Yeats's ideas do appear to be private and idiosyncratic.

John Unterecker suggests that "Yeats was well aware of the critic's problem, and he did his best to make things easy for the commentator" by publishing Prefaces and Notes, autobiography and aesthetic theory. "What Yeats was trying to do, of course, was to make available to his public everything that good criticism eventually uncovers. He was also doing his best to safeguard his work against inaccurate interpretation".[3] The implication is that, although he wished his work to be understood, Yeats did not write it with that in mind, or else he failed in his attempt to make it comprehensible. In either case, the poems could not be considered to stand alone.

Carrying this approach to its logical conclusion, T.R. Henn writes "All that Yeats saw and read and thought must one day be examined...[because] there is still a

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1 Yeats's Iconography, 1960, p.14.

2 Ibid., p.17.

3 Yeats, 1963, p.1.

residue of complexity and uncertainty of interpretation, and only through such study will the full significance of the poetry become apparent".[1] Obviously, in order to carry out Henn's proposition in full, it would finally be necessary to become the poet, or even more, to assume god-like omniscience, since it demands not only a complete knowledge of the poet's mind but also the ability to see him in a period and environment, and in the context of various large systems of thought.

Henn is brought to this position by his argument, that symbolic poetry is incapable of the clarity and precision demanded of it by critics who wish to understand the poem as a unit, because

> the 'reality' expressed by the symbol is, in terms of an algebraic analysis, infinitely complex; and though the variation of meaning is decreased by the selective impact of one symbol upon another, the total effect must always be that of a richly cumulative but indeterminate complexity.[2]

Therefore, Henn adds, the critic "must, in the last resort, suggest what is no more than a personal interpretation or response".[3] A similar mistrust and misunderstanding of symbolism underlies the attitudes of many critics. M.I. Seiden argues that "Yeats's poems reverberate with nuances we can only half apprehend, the more remarkable to us because the sheer wonder of them escapes definition".[4]

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1 The Lonely Tower, 1965, p.xiii.

2 Henn, p.xiv.

3 Ibid., p.xv.

4 William Butler Yeats. The Poet as Mythmaker, 1962, p.5.

Although this may be said of any good poem, it is not necessary to assume, as Seiden does, that the poems are therefore incomprehensible individually, but because he believes that no single poem can wholly contain or define the symbols appearing in it Seiden turns his attention away from the poems and examines instead the symbols, often isolating them from the poems. The poems thus tend to become mere texts for the exposition of the symbols. At the most they are of no more importance than the poet's ideas, or sources, or even his life-history.

Seiden suggests that "if we would truly understand [Yeats's] symbols, perhaps A Vision, our understanding of his poetic methods, and our intuition must guide us in all our analyses...".[1] As he understands Yeats's poetic method to be the elaboration of the ideas of A Vision through a subtly allusive symbolism, the poet's ideas become his dominating interest as he searches for some unifying pattern, and the poems are reduced to components: "Yeats attempted to create in the essay A Vision a private religious faith, and simultaneously to write many poems - the fragments of a great myth - all based on that faith".[2] (Author's italics). Other critics who show a similar disregard for the poems as anything but receptacles for the poet's symbols are Giorgio Melchiori, A.G. Stock, and Louis MacNeice.[3] In various ways the underlying patterns

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1 Seiden, p.163.

2 Ibid., p.2.

3 The Whole Mystery of Art, 1960; W.B. Yeats: His Poetry and Thought, 1961; The Poetry of W.B. Yeats, 1941.

of thought or other external elements predominate, and lessen the critic's grasp of the poems.

It is frequently argued that such enquiries reveal more meaning in the poems, that understanding of the system, for instance, gives greater depth to the symbols related to it, but in fact there is a risk that the poem will have, in the end, less meaning - that its meaning will be unnecessarily restricted to special or individual concerns. In the lines discussed by Blackmur (p.viii above) the meaning is far more rich, general and "true" to human experience than in the narrower and more eccentric context of Yeats's system. While this latter may have been the means of Yeats's achieving the wider perspectives of the poem, this scaffolding may be almost irrelevant to the poem as it stands because poetry consists of words and makes its meaning through its use of the resources of the language in which it is written. It can only suspend the ordinary meanings of words by limiting them through their contexts and it cannot arbitrarily extend the meaning of a word without making some internal provision for the extension if it is to be more than an accidental or surrealist effusion. In the lines quoted, the "best" and "worst" have far wider relevance, while being at the same time sufficiently specified to take on concrete images, when understood from the reader's experience than they do in the recondite terminology of A Vision.

A related approach which takes a step nearer to the poems by leaving aside, to a greater or lesser extent, A Vision and other external material, may be illustrated by a quotation from Daiches:

> To appreciate the best of these poems we do not need any detailed study of Yeats's prose works, though hints here and there are often very helpful; but we do need to know the dominant motives in Yeats's poetry, for the poems echo each other and often enrich each other in a very curious way....[1]

The result of such inclusiveness is, in practice, to assume that it is the symbols, rather than the poems, which may be said to have some unity in that they persist in the poet's mind to re-appear in other poems. Thus, D.A. Stauffer claims that

> Fully to understand the meaning of 'gyre' in one of his later poems, all of its uses in earlier poems must ideally be in our mind - not only when the word itself is used, but when it is only half-suggested, or left as a hidden image, not fully developed, but controlling the movement of the thought.[2]

The circularity of the argument is clear from this statement, but more important is the latitude which the critic consequently permits himself in his interpretations, with the corresponding possibility of insensitivity to the particular case in favour of broader generalisations.

This objection applies also to those critics who quite literally, in Allen Tate's words, create Yeats's romanticism by attempting to restrict him to the particular background of the late Romantic period. Seen in this light, Yeats becomes as subjective a poet as he does if his poems are regarded as expositions of his personal

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1 Poetry and the Modern World, 1948, p.180.

2 The Golden Nightingale, 1949, p.40.

faith or mythology, but with the added stigma of escapism, of turning away from the contemporary world to a private dream. His dramatic masks and the concreteness of his symbols are taken to be counterfeit devices to conceal a basic inhumanity and isolation and the oratorical force of the poetry reduces to defiant rhetorical gesturing. The accusations range from romantic vagueness to excessive schematisation, and even to a self-indulgent adherence to old-fashioned verse-forms.[1] Frank Kermode[2] gives a sometimes very subtle interpretation of the poems in terms of particular romantic attitudes and preoccupations, which nevertheless suffers from the same weaknesses as other interpretations which apply an external discipline to the poems.

Those who disapprove of methods of literary criticism based on close attention to the text sometimes argue, as does G.S. Fraser,[3] that it leads to a narrowly mechanical treatment of the poem, leaving out of account imaginative insight and background perspective. Fraser's arguments are not supported by the particular examples he discusses because, in the first place, they are not good examples of the application of such methods, but also, and more generally, because such objections are directed rather at the practitioner than at the method. Few readers of poetry, surely, would deny the vital necessity of

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1 A. Mizener, "The Romanticism of W.B. Yeats", P.Y., pp.125-145; E. Engelberg, The Vast Design, 1964, and J. Bayley, The Romantic Survival, 1960; D.S. Savage, P.Y., pp.173-194. See later discussions.

2 Romantic Image, 1957.

3 Vision and Rhetoric, 1959.

imaginative insight, and, while it requires some qualification, few would argue against the importance of background perspective in the broadest sense of historical and cultural relationship.

Under these conditions, close textual analysis is the most immediate tool for accurate understanding of the work, which must precede critical assessment either of poem or of poet. Even if it should transpire that Yeats's poems do gain from being read in some larger context, as for instance in volumes of poems as published, as has often been suggested recently,[1] all such readings must begin from the most complete understanding possible of the individual poems. Certainly, the poems cannot be said to be unintelligible or unsatisfactory in themselves unless it is demonstrated that they yield no coherent meaning to a careful examination.

Many critics maintain that on the whole Yeats's poems do stand up to scrutiny and are comprehensible without unduly specialised knowledge, among them Bowra, Tate, Theodore Spencer, Graham Martin, John Crowe Ransom and Howard Baker.[2] It is unfortunate that Vivienne Koch,[3] the only critic who has attempted to demonstrate this by

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1 H. Kenner, "The Sacred Book of the Arts", Unterecker, pp. 10-22; B. Rajan, W.B. Yeats, 1965; D. Donoghue & J.R. Mulryne, An Honoured Guest, 1965. See later discussions.

2 The Heritage of Symbolism, 1947; P.Y., pp.97-105; "The Later Poetry of W.B. Yeats", Literary Opinion in America, M.D. Zabel ed., pp.270-281; "The Later Poetry of W.B. Yeats", Pelican Guide, V.7, pp.170-195; "Yeats and his Symbols", P.Y., pp.85-96; "Domes of Byzantium", Southern Review, VII (1941-2), pp.639-52.

3 W.B. Yeats. The Tragic Phase, 1951.

proposing to discuss particular poems without external reference, does not in fact do so in crucial instances, but turns instead to the miscellany of parallel passages from Yeats's prose which are commonly supplied as "explanations" of the poems by other critics.

From the foregoing summary of critical approaches to Yeats's poetry it may be seen that the following questions remain to be answered:- If it exists, in what does the unity of a poem consist? It may lie in the writer's intended meaning, or in some structure in which the poem is contained or to which it is related, or in the reader's mental response, or in the poem itself. If the unity of a poem lies in its affiliation to some external structure, can a study of that structure or of related material supply meanings not available from the poem which will make an unsatisfactory poem satisfactory or "unify" a poem whose unity is not otherwise apparent? That is, what exactly is the status of such external knowledge with respect to the poem?

If it lies in the reader's response, is there any limitation of response or any common ground which can be said to give the poem as it stands some self-consistency, or is criticism merely a matter of opinion or taste? Or if the poem itself has some unity, what is its nature, and how can it be ascertained or demonstrated? The question which immediately presents itself here is whether symbolism is as limitless and ineffable as some critics suggest. Explicitly or implicitly, this underlies many of their attitudes to the poetry, and if it should prove to be false, may go far towards invalidating their charges or assumptions of privacy in Yeats's later poetry. There are

thus two major aspects to the problem of the integrity of his poetry: the first results from Yeats's use of symbolism and from the critics' understanding of his method and of symbolism in general, and the second is the question of whether Yeats's technique is such that his poetry is comprehensible as it stands or whether his esoteric interests require special, separate investigation and understanding.

II

In this thesis I therefore adopt the following method. First I examine the theory of symbolism in general and in literature, considering its relationship to metaphor and poetic language, and to so-called symbolic poetry. This leads to the conclusion that poetry has a unity within itself resulting from the fact that symbol, while it has a theoretically infinite suggestiveness, is defined and limited in poetry by context. The critical approaches that deny the autonomy of the poem may then be seen to arise from misconceptions of the nature of symbol, which induce the critics to turn their attention away from the poetry in various ways. These are outlined at the beginning of chapter two and then discussed in detail in the works of particular critics. In the third chapter I examine the second aspect, the adequacy of Yeats's technique. I interpret a number of the later poems as far as possible as integral works of art, following each reading with a discussion of the interpretations of other critics.

# CHAPTER I

## SYMBOLISM IN THEORY AND IN LITERATURE

### I. Theory of Symbolism

Language has become a major focus of philosophical questioning in this century, being treated as an autonomous realm of meaning standing between man and whatever is not man. The dominance of the question of meaning at the present time has been related[1] to the intellectual conflict brought into prominence by the Cartesian polarity of mind and body, inner and outer worlds, and by the resulting extremes of idealism and materialism. Dualist philosophy begets a distinction of subject and object which finally isolates man from his environment and deprives him of any context of meaning within it. To represent spirit and matter as incongruous with one another is to deny the possibility of any relationship between them. Faced with the prospect of meaninglessness, the process of understanding and knowing, of how we achieve or realise meaning, becomes the most important question. The philosophy of symbolism emerged as an attempt to understand this process and to redefine it in such a way that the problem of dualism no longer applies.

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[1] See S. Langer, Philosophical Sketches, Mentor Books, 1964, pp.53-4, Charles Fiedelson, Jr., Symbolism and American Literature, 1953, p.49.

The primary postulate is that, since knowledge can never grasp reality itself and can never reproduce the true nature of things, all knowledge must necessarily be symbolic. The mind holds symbols which result from a process (characteristic of man's mental activity) of intensive interaction between object and inner experience. Language is one of the symbolic forms of knowledge, as also are art, science, mythology, philosophy, and as such is more than a mysteriously-formed copy of a given reality, knowable apart from language or any of the other forms, and prior to it or them in value. Rather it is a means by which we apprehend reality and is therefore not only representative but also constitutive of the world as we know it.

Under the dualist system language is purely vehicular in function, serving to denote a world of real objects by an unknown, but direct and conventional linkage. Words are simply ciphers, bringing to mind "images" of the objects to which they refer. Literature, regarded objectively, becomes a simple imitation of nature; alternatively, it may be seen from the subjective viewpoint as something which produces certain effects in the reader. The content, meaning and truth of such intellectual forms as language is either to be judged by their reproduction of something extraneous, or, as in the theory of literature developed by I.A. Richards,[1] to be considered as possessing no propositional character, no truth value with respect to the outside world, but only as having a personal value. Literature, Richards says, is

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[1] Principles of Literary Criticism, 1959.

composed of "pseudo-statements" which are purely emotive and without cognitive reference, and its value is therapeutic, to balance, and so help to control, the emotions.

Neither subjective nor objective viewpoint provides a satisfactory means of mediating between object and language. Nor does either provide a method of banishing the spectres of immateriality. Language itself resists the attempt to divide off subject and object into logical extremes. Speculations that words having immaterial reference originated from "literal" denotative words have been shown[1] to be logically insupportable in the face of the irreducibly compound nature of man's experience of the world. The very discussion of the relative status of "literal" and "abstract" words immediately introduces questions of values, human relationships, and other psychological factors, so that the possibility of such discussion depends on the existence of a positive context of mediacy between inner and outer worlds.

Language as symbolic form provides such a context. Looked at this way it is part of a reflexive activity between man and his environment, a system "in which man interposes patterns of his own creation between reception of and reaction to stimuli".[2] The triangular "meaning"

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1 O. Barfield, "The Meaning of the Word 'Literal'", Metaphor and Symbol, ed. L.C. Knights and Basil Cottle, 1960, pp.48-63.

2 F.W. Dillistone, "The Function of Symbols in Religious Experience", in Knights and Cottle, p.III.

diagram of Ogden and Richards[1] becomes a genuine triangle in which all three points, subject, language and object, have an equality of function, as Philip Wheelwright[2] points out, and language figures as more than a somewhat unstable sign-convention. The ontological question of the existence of a knowable reality, while not cancelled or minimised in any way, becomes separable from the consideration of language as a mode of knowing.

In transcendentalist theory, the process of knowing is something "given" from outside. Philosophers committed to traditional logic explain our way of forming concepts as a process of abstraction of common properties by comparison and contrast. But, as Susanne Langer notes,[3] there is a difference between our way of forming universals and the way we know them. Her great predecessor, Ernst Cassirer, argued that logic does not suggest how the mind determined these properties, or why these ideas were collected into a whole and denoted by a single word. His contention was that the argument of logic is circular; that the mind can only determine these properties through the formulation of linguistic notions. The processes of "noticing" and "naming", he held, must be prior to that of "denoting", and the properties must have been denoted by a sign before the mind could recognise them as such.[4] Eliseo Vivas re-states this idea with admirable clarity:

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1 The Meaning of Meaning, 1949, p.10ff.

2 "Semantics and Ontology", Knights and Cottle, p.3.

3 Langer, p.67.

4 Language and Myth, Dover, p.32.

> before a mind can make anything stand for something else, both the sign and the thing signified must be grasped by the mind for what they are, each must be given identity, each must be discriminated from other things.[1]

Vivas's more general statement is no doubt more defensible than Cassirer's, since the very existence of other symbolic forms controverts the absolute primacy of language as the necessary corollary of "noticing"; but the vital importance of language to man's discrimination of the world cannot be denied, and Cassirer's theory promoted the realisation of its status and function.

Cassirer describes the process of symbolisation as the complementary, and in many ways the opposite, of logical conceptualisation. The discursive mode of thought, starting from a particular case, proceeds to distinguish it from others by a series of acts of comparison. Contrasted to this process of delimitation of the boundaries of the particular by setting it beside others is that mode of confronting the particular in which the mind "comes to rest in the immediate experience, the sensible present". There is a concentration upon the singular rather than an expansion over a range of experiential data; the particular is regarded as unique rather than a member of a class or species.

The focussing of the mind upon the immediate present, Cassirer suggests, induces the utmost tension between subject and object, which finds release as the subjective excitement becomes objectified and confronts the mind as

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1 D.H. Lawrence. The Failure and the Triumph of Art, "The Constitutive Symbol", 1961, p.276.

symbol. Cassirer relates this intimately to mythical perception in which, he says, the mind arrives at a conviction of the presence of a being, a "momentary god" or a "mana" concept, through the significance found in the relationship with the "other".

One may perhaps compare with this process the young Joyce's Aquinian system of "epiphany" in which the object is first apprehended as a whole, then as a self-consistent symmetry of parts, and finally in its "quiddity", its "soul" or "radiance".[1] Or again, one may compare Louis Martz's description of the method of meditation[2] (he is quoting St. François de Sales):

> "By the meanes of this imagination, we lock up our spirit as it were within the closet of the mysterie which we meane to meditate". The effect is an intense, deliberate focusing of the "mind and thought...either by imaginarie representation, if the matter may be subject to the sences; or by a simple proposing and conceit of it, if it be a matter above sence", or...some concrete similitude dramatizing even spiritual matters.

Martz also points out that meditation was a discipline directed toward creating the "act of pure attention" which D.H. Lawrence thought essential to decision or discovery: the choice of "that object to concentrate upon which will best focus your consciousness".[3] The Wordsworth sonnet "With ships the sea was scattered" provides an

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1 Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, Cape, 1960, p.216.

2 The Poetry of Meditation, 1955, p.30.

3 Martz, p.67.

outstandingly clear example of the operation of such a process of focussing of attention to achieve a personal decision, a "direction of the personality as a whole" (to use the words in which L.C. Knights describes the meaning of a symbol[1]).

The underlying idea of all these statements is the reaching out of the mind to grasp the object, and its assimilation into the needs and desires of that person's life. Cassirer says, "Whatever appears important for our wishing and willing, our hope and anxiety, for acting and doing: that and that only receives the stamp of verbal meaning".[2] Whether the process begins from some such external accident as in Usener's "momentary god" theory,[3] or whether it originates from the subject's inner condition, the essential element in the process is the uniting of subject and object in a single act, which is the evolution of meaning. R.M. Eaton says: "symbol, attitude [of subject] and object are united in a whole which is the presentation of the object". All three terms,

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1 "Idea and Symbol", Knights and Cottle, p.142. Relevant also is the passage from Wallace Stevens's "Credences of Summer" quoted by Martz, p.68:

> Three times the concentred self takes hold, three times
> The thrice concentred self, having possessed
>
> The object, grips it in savage scrutiny,
> Once to make captive, once to subjugate
> Or yield to subjugation, once to proclaim
> The meaning of the capture, this hard prize,
> Fully made, fully apparent, fully found.

2 Cassirer, p.37.

3 Ibid., p.18.

he says, are aspects of a single process of meaning. "If the meaning of a symbol is not an idea or thing for which the symbol arbitrarily stands, it is a productive activity: the meaning rather than the meant".[1]

Vivas comments that "when the constitutive symbol is achieved, there is an interanimation between it and the thing or process it symbolizes, a kind of permeation so that for us the world is a world grasped not only through the symbol but in the symbol also".[2] Two points arise from this. The first is that, as Cassirer says, "myth, art, language and science appear as symbols; not in the sense of mere figures which refer to some given reality by means of suggestion and allegorical renderings, but in the sense of forces each of which produces and posits a world of its own".[3] So, adds W.M. Urban, "Language...is not moulded on reality. It is rather the mould in which reality as significant is first given".[4] Language is both the means and limitation of our view of the world, since, as Cassirer notes, "all symbolism harbors the curse of mediacy; it is bound to obscure what it seeks to reveal".[5] The importance of this dual nature of symbolism with respect to literature, and to Yeats in particular, is obvious, and will be discussed in further detail later.

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1 Quoted by Fiedelson, pp.52-3, from Symbolism and Truth, 1925, p.34, and p.157.

2 Vivas, p.279.

3 Cassirer, p.6.

4 Language and Reality, 1951, p.375.

5 Cassirer, p.7.

The second point has already been suggested, that a different kind of meaning is involved in symbolic thought. Susanne Langer comments that Cassirer characterised the symbol as being a word, sound, mark, object or event which could be a symbol to a person "without that person's consciously going from it to its meaning". The symbols of art are symbols of a sort, but not of the sort found in logical discourse, because they do not "point beyond themselves to something thereafter known apart from the symbol, nor are they established by convention". Hence, works of art, she says, "have import, but not genuine meaning".[1]

By "genuine meaning" she is evidently referring to sign-meaning, that is, the sort of meaning described by Ogden and Richards. Symbolisation, she comments, "furnishes no principle of conceptual advance, no phenomenal means of conception".[2] Her argument is thus made more complex by accepting a general notion of symbol, and yet arguing from another, and more restricted, viewpoint. The complication arises from the fact that she is arguing against Bergson's narrow conception of abstraction as unnatural, an essential falsification of reality. Abstraction is the perception of form, she maintains, and the perception of form arises from the process of symbolisation, so that "Any device whereby we make an abstraction is a symbolic element, and all abstraction involves symbolisation."[3] This is put forward

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1 Langer, p.60.

2 Ibid., p.59.

3 Ibid., p.60.

as a tentative definition of symbol, and is quoted here because, although it states what Mrs Langer set out to show, it leaves the connection between symbolisation and abstraction vague, and in fact gives no necessary definition of symbol at all, testifying that the way to an understanding of symbolisation is not through the realm of logical discourse.

This is not, of course, to suggest that Mrs Langer does not recognise that symbols may have two properties of meaning (the "in" and "through" of Vivas's statement[1]), but she considers the symbols of art, those referred to in Cassirer's statement, to be more primitive, because unassigned and unconventional, than the symbols of logical discourse, and suggests that they be taken separately. But to say that the one type is more primitive is to suggest that it is primary, and hence her attempt to define symbol without considering it must be incomplete.

Mrs Langer defines the two properties of symbols as "signifying" and "formulative". Art, she says, may be considered to be "expressive form", indicating that it has no sign quality but is purely formulative. Yet she maintains that the symbols of logical discourse have both qualities, the formulative as their act of abstraction and the signifying as their effect. However, since literary symbols, at least, are expressed by means of language, which does have the signifying quality, and since a total divagation of means and ends seems unlikely, it appears probable that literary symbols are as compound in quality as any others. The difference appears rather to lie in

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1 See above, p.8.

the direction of their signification, which seems to be towards inner values rather than external facts. This also will be further discussed in terms of literature itself.

Before doing so, however, another view of the symbol, that of the psychologist, requires consideration, but the discussion can be brief since the question has been well handled by Eliseo Vivas[1] and others. D.W. Harding[2] suggests that beliefs and evaluative attitudes may only exist in a pre-formulative stage. "In a sense", he says, "body thinks, exercising non-conscious control over our reactions". Emotion completes sense-perception, he argues, so that every perception has emotional significance, being in some way, however slight, welcome or unwelcome. C.G. Jung says,

> The symbols of the self arise in the depths of the body and they express its materiality every bit as much as the structure of the perceiving consciousness....The more archaic and "deeper", that is the more physiological, the symbol is, the more collective and universal, the more "material" it is. The more abstracted, differentiated, and specific it is, and the more its nature approximates to conscious uniqueness and individuality, the more it sloughs off its universal character. Having finally achieved full consciousness, it runs the risk of becoming a mere allegory which nowhere oversteps the bounds of conscious comprehension, and is then exposed to all sorts of attempts at rationalistic and therefore inadequate explanations.[3]

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1 Vivas, pp.290-1, Ira Progoff, Jung's Psychology and its Social Meaning, 1953, p.270.

2 "The Hinterland of Thought", Experience into Words, p.184, also in Knights and Cottle, p.11.

3 The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious, 1959, p.173.

Finally, D.H. Lawrence says that symbols are "organic units of consciousness with a life of their own, and you can never explain them away, because their value is dynamic, emotional, belonging to the sense-consciousness of the body and the soul, and not simply mental".[1]

The difference between this view and that discussed earlier has been expressed by Ira Progoff:

> Cassirer proceeds with the idea that man is essentially a symbol-making creature. It would be correct to say that Jung holds the same belief. The difference, however, is that Cassirer understands symbols as instruments which arise out of man's experience in his efforts to further his purposes in communicating with other men and in thinking more efficiently. The question of symbols has, essentially, an epistemological meaning to him. Jung, on the other hand, interprets symbols in terms of the inner functioning of the psyche. Symbols do not arise out of experience as a means of communication in society, but symbols arise out of the spontaneous creativity within the psyche. There is thus a basic difference in the conception of the ways in which symbols function. To Cassirer they are effective as means of knowledge in relation to outer experience; to Jung they are effective in the depths of the personality as autonomous channelizers of psychic energy. Symbols operate on a more fundamental level for Jung. When they are understood only as means of communication they are on the level of consciousness, which is the surface of the psyche; but as autonomous and spontaneous creations carrying large sums of energy, they operate in the unconscious and express basic psychic processes.[2]

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1 Selected Literary Criticism, p.157.

2 Progoff, p.270.

As a representation of Cassirer's position this may not be entirely adequate, but it does give the two extremes clearly. Vivas comments that the two views have much in common also. Both distinguish between symbol as constitutive, embodying the object, and symbol as sign, or "mere intended meaning symbolised", where the object to which the sign refers is independent of the sign. Also, both accord the symbol a charge of meaningfulness which is not totally accessible to logical explanation. Moreover, he adds, "the two interests, those of the psychologist and those of the epistemologist, are not necessarily incompatible with one another. In fact, the symbolic archetype, whatever its source, functions in literature and in religion as a kind of means of communication".[1]

There is also the further point that, whether they are regarded basically from the objective or the subjective point of view, symbols still represent for either view a process of mediation between inner and outer worlds. Jung traces the symbolic archetype to the primordial experience of the human race. L.C. Knights suggests that a passage such as this from The Winter's Tale:

> ...when you do dance, I wish you
> A wave o' the sea, that you might ever do
> Nothing but that; move still, still so,
> And own no other function...,

which has responsiveness to great natural rhythms, conveys a sense of "the impersonal depths of personality". Such lines imply that "the conscious ego rests on, draws its

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1 Vivas, p.291.

strength from, something greater than itself".[1] The rhythm of the lines and our response to them belong to the same world, Knights says, the world of action and relationship and commitment in which we make and enact our being. Whether it is expressed as the emergence into conscious recognition of primordial human experience, or as the way in which we come to know our environment and our relation to it, the symbol can be seen as the result of a blending of man's spontaneity and receptivity, or, as Harding says, of perception and emotion.

## II. Symbolism in Literature

The modern preoccupation with language as a field of meaning has given rise to the consideration of literary works as structures of language rather than as products of a particular poet's mind or as images relating to an external world. The literary work is regarded as a symbol, "autonomous", as Fiedelson says, "in the sense of being distinct from the personality of the author and any world of pure objects, creative in that it brings into existence its own meaning".[2] The effect of such a view can be seen not only in critical theory, but also in practice in the many experiments with language and with literary structures which have been made in this period. Not least among them is the deliberate symbolism which is the root of many of the problems connected with the criticism of Yeats's poetry. Certain common attitudes towards symbolism have, I believe, contributed largely towards

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1 Knights and Cottle, p.141.

2 Fiedelson, p.49.

such problems as the meanings of symbols, the so-called "heresy of paraphrase", privacy of reference, the status of and induction from external sources by critics.

What is the nature of the relationship between the theory and practice of symbolism in poetry and the actual structure of language? Logical and poetic discourse are often distinguished. Has the distinction any basis in fact? Can one assume, for instance, that one is somehow "pure" or basically appropriate in poetry and the other inappropriate? The foregoing discussion suggests that a distinction between that use of language in which it is directly referential to an external object and that in which it is reflexive and complex is essential to an understanding of the process of symbolisation, whether or not the distinction is in fact absolute in poetry.

Philip Wheelwright proposes the terms "block language" and "fluid language" for the distinction, of which "block language" is such that it is denotative and propositional, obeys the laws of logic, and is atomistic in structure, that is to say, its elements are discrete in form. "Fluid language", on the other hand, as its name implies, is language that has not become regularised in this fashion. Its elements are variable and miscible, and it is alogical in structure, involving multiple relations of a kind that do not obey simple logic. Block language, Wheelwright suggests, may be considered to be a limiting possibility of fluid language.

Another way of expressing the difference is to characterise one mode as literal, the other figurative. Metaphor is essentially figurative, and it is suggested

that it is the poetic equivalent of the concept,[1] since it expresses relationship. But the manner of relationship will differ in that two ideas in logical relationship will remain discrete, but in the metaphorical relationship the two ideas will, if such suppositions as Wheelwright's are correct, tend to lose their distinctive characters, producing a complex meaning inaccessible to simple logic.

Aristotle's definition of metaphor in the Poetics states that:

> Metaphor consists in giving a thing the name that belongs properly to something else, the transference being either (i) from genus to species, or (ii) from species to genus, or (iii) from species to species, or (iv) on grounds of analogy.[2]

Christine Brooke-Rose[3] points out that the first two are really not metaphor but synecdoche and metonymy. Both tropes have some of the power and character of metaphor, but they differ in that the species element tends to stand as an emblem with respect to the genus element, being related to a specific concept or conceptual group, e.g. crown:king. But in any case Aristotle's definition tells us very little about the nature of metaphorical meaning.

This definition can perhaps be seen behind Coleridges's statement that symbol is

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1 Wheelwright, Knights and Cottle, pp.3-4, Wimsatt, "Symbol and Metaphor", The Verbal Icon, 1954, p.129.

2 XXI, 1-6 (p.36).

3 A Grammar of Metaphor, 1958, p.4.

> characterised by the translucence of the special in the individual, or of the general in the especial, or of the universal in the general. Above all by the translucence of the eternal through and in the temporal. It always partakes of the reality which it renders intelligible; and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that unity, of which it is the representative.[1]

The great difference between these two statements may be due to the one's describing metaphor, the other symbol, but Coleridge evidently saw fit to make the comparison possible and reasons for comparing the two will emerge in the course of this discussion. The last sentence of the Coleridge definition adds two major ideas to Aristotle's: that meaning resides both in and through the symbol, and that it not only stands for but also is part of what it represents. The first has already been discussed; the second is allied to, but perhaps not identical with, the first. In this respect the nature of symbol appears to be akin to the synecdoche-tropes suggested by Aristotle. But there is another significant difference between the two statements, which lies in the single word "translucence". This word, itself metaphorical, evokes a subtlety of relationship not included in the word "transference". It is the difference between our experience and imagination of the effects of light, partly lighting up, partly shining through, a substance, and the simple, mechanical and non-sensual idea of transference.

Beside these we might put Herbert Read's definition of metaphor as

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1 "The Statesman's Manual", Political Tracts of Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley, ed. R.J. White, 1953, p.25, quoted by Knights, Knights and Cottle, p.135.

> the synthesis of several units of observation into one commanding image: it is the expression of a complex idea, not by analysis, nor by abstract statement, but by a sudden perception of an objective relation.[1]

or W.B. Stanford's definition that metaphor is

> the process and result of using a term (X) normally signifying an object or concept (A) in such a context that it must refer to another object or concept (B) which is distinct enough in characteristics from A to ensure that in the composite idea formed by the synthesis of the concepts A and B and now symbolised in the word X, the factors A and B retain their conceptual independence even while they merge in the unity symbolised by X.[2]

The main difference between these two definitions and Aristotle's, which at the same time brings them closer to Coleridge's definition of symbol, is the idea that the metaphor represents a synthesis of some kind. Aristotle's attempt to give an objective classification hints at this, but it is at once too general in its basic concept and too specific in its applications.

Wheelwright proposes to distinguish between Aristotle's notion of transfer and Read's "synthesis...by a sudden perception of an objective relation" by differentiating "epiphor" (transference) from "diaphor" (a "semantic movement through...a grouping of several particulars"). A good metaphor, he argues, should combine the two, being diaphoric "to the extent that the

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1 English Prose Style, 1952, p.23, quoted by Wheelwright, Knights and Cottle, p.5.

2 Greek Metaphor, 1936, p.101.

significant resemblance is that which has been induced by, and is emergent from, the metaphor itself".[1]

But Read's definition itself leaves us relatively little wiser about the nature of the process. An "objective relation" is very general indeed. Stanford's definition adds the idea that the synthesis is tensive by nature, the two factors being both similar and dissimilar, so that they can be brought together into a new meaning relationship while yet retaining their independence (as Aristotle also noted elsewhere[2]).

This would seem to suggest that Wheelwright's proposals were not, after all, correct since the two factors do retain their independence (see page 15), but the matter is not so straightforward since A and B both lose their independent characters and retain them. That is to say, there is both epiphor and diaphor (as Wheelwright says), both transference between particulars and a new synthesis.

Stanford's definition describes admirably a metaphor such as "the ship ploughs the waves", where it is possible to fit the pieces into Stanford's pattern exactly: e.g. X is "ploughs", A is then the action of a plough moving through the soil, and B is the action of a ship moving through the sea. This would come under Aristotle's fourth category "on grounds of analogy" and is of the sort that Winifred Nowottny describes as giving a diagram or model of the

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1 Knights and Cottle, pp.5-6.

2 E.g. Rhetorica, Book III.ii.1412a.

relationship,[1] in this case the hull or keel parting the water and throwing up bough waves on either side just as the plough does in the soil.

But even this definition, admirably precise though it is, does not fully accord with every possibility of metaphor. Marvell's "the Iron gates of Life" for instance, does not conform readily to the pattern. The conjunctive term X would be "Iron gates" and the B term "Life", but what exactly is the A term? "Iron gates" might well be said to signify some elaborately-wrought formal entrance, but to put this into the context of "Life" produces no obvious unity or composite idea, and the effect is even more anomalous if the metaphor is put into its context in the poem:

> And tear our Pleasures with rough strife,
> Thorough the Iron gates of Life.

There must therefore be other significations of "Iron gates" which will provide a suitable "similarity in dissimilarity" with "Life". "Gate" is a boundary concept, which may have welcoming or forbidding qualities, may be

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1 The Language Poet's Use, 1962, p.63. Hugh Kenner (The Poetry of Ezra Pound, 1951, p.87) takes this metaphor as an example to show that metaphor has four related terms; Donald Davie (Articulate Energy, 1955, p.41) claims that this example shows that metaphor has six terms. In fact, as Christine Brooke-Rose (A Grammar of Metaphor, p.206) points out, in this case there is a transitive verb metaphoric in relation to both its subject and its object, so it could be said to have six terms, but no general statement about metaphor can be based on this factor because it varies with the grammatical structure of the metaphor.

wide and open, or restrictive and frightening. The wrought-iron gates might in fact have fitted as broad and welcoming, promising a life of leisure and elegance, but "Iron" on its own signifies other things than metal tracery. Even this most serviceable and prosaic of substances is not restricted to a single reference. Here it is an adjective, and its qualities of hardness and coldness, and of sheer physical substantiality and inevitability seem to be required. Put together, the A concept would then be a narrow, hard and forbidding passage akin perhaps to the Iron Gates of the Danube.

Thus Stanford's definition can be applied to this metaphor, but with qualifications. To see what these are, consider I.A. Richards's "tenor" and "vehicle" theory of metaphor.[1] The tenor in this case would not be "Life" but a meaning produced by the interaction of the two factors "Iron gates" and "Life", and the two together also form the vehicle. The best way of describing the effect is Fiedelson's: that the metaphor establishes the idea of life under the aspect of iron gates, and of iron gates under the aspect of life.[2] What Stanford's definition lacks, therefore, is an adequate statement of the reflexivity of metaphor, the way in which A is determined by B and B by A. That is to say, it does not allow for the extent to which "the significant resemblance is that which has been induced by, and is emergent from, the metaphor itself": the diaphoric element.

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1 Philosophy of Rhetoric, 1950.

2 Fiedelson, p.60.

In a normal logical structure the parts are independent, but in this metaphorical structure the relationship of part to part involves a relationship of part to whole. There is a feedback element in the structure, so that the final pattern is composed of a complex of logically direct and logically circular relationships. "Iron gates" and "Life" mean something different when they are brought into contact, even though they retain some of their independent "signification".

How true is it then to say that there is no simple reference value in a literary symbol as there is in logical discourse, as Susanne Langer and I.A. Richards do? Even something so apparently simple as Iron gates has a range of possible meaning, as has been shown. If the words were set in a context of discursive language, the particular quality being referred to, their usefulness, strength, design, or some such, would be stated and probably discussed in comparison with other like qualities. They could, on the other hand, be set into a context in which it became clear that the meaning intended was not that which immediately appeared, but another, different, meaning from among those possible, which was left unstated. This would be made clear by the fact that the direct reference of the whole context diverged noticeably from our normal experience. The words might then be said to have a pseudo-reference and the statements to be pseudo-statements. The direct reference of the word in the stated context is cancelled out, and the only real meaning is that implied by the clues given in the context. It should be noted, however, that the direct reference may well be part of the clues to the real or "substituted" meaning.

The latter is Owen Barfield's[1] name for this usage, and he distinguishes a third category, "concomitant" meaning, in which both the primary and the secondary meanings are accepted. As Barfield says, the element of concomitance might be thought to bear some relation to the verisimilitude of the literal meaning, that both, for instance should have reference value or else both be without, but metaphor is more complex than this. "Iron gates" are denied conventional reference value, in the sense that we are to assume that the primary purpose of the context at that point is to discuss a particular quality of iron gates, indicated by their attribution to "Life". The contrast forces us to search the range of meaning of these words for something which has a common aspect, and the result is not a simple logical conclusion. Because of this the mind is forced into activity and the metaphor becomes "alive". Substituted meaning such as the simpler kinds of irony works logically through the discovery of logical discrepancy, allegory through the discovery of logical resemblance. In each case the references of the words are fixed in relation to the reference level concerned, whether it be primary, substituted or concomitant. In metaphor this is not so. The possibility of a single external reference is cancelled, and total possible reference, including both literal and metaphorical associations, must be considered for each side of the metaphor. The bounds of possibility are then marked out by the context of the relationship. Thus, the metaphor does not have simple reference value, but does include the denotative meaning as part of its total significance.

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[1] Knights and Cottle, p.48.

Winifred Nowottny suggests that before something can be used as the figurative end of a metaphor, it must have a sufficiently recognizable terminology associated with it and must not introduce irrelevant contexts. The first is true, since the wider the associational range, the greater the possibility of forming new associations, but the second statement is not strictly acceptable because all those contexts are relevant which are possible in the combination and in the total context. Those which are not possible are necessarily irrelevant. There is the possibility that the common aspects are so slender, or the diaphoric element so weak (as in a metaphor which is near to cliché), that unwanted associations are accepted in desperation, but in these cases the language is not really operating as metaphor. The power of metaphor to formulate meaning is very strong. A word such as "life" shows this most clearly since, as Norbert Wiener says, "words such as life, purpose, and soul are grossly inadequate to precise scientific thinking...[because they] have gained their significance through our recognition of a certain group of phenomena, and do not in fact furnish us with any adequate basis of this unity".[1] There is a diffuseness of associational range which makes it almost necessary to redefine the word's meaning in each new relationship. Marvell's metaphor, in its context, goes far towards doing this.

Because metaphorical meaning is not conventional, but acts out the sense of the implied term inasmuch as the mind is forced to make the connections at that time, and because it makes use of as many of the associations as

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1 The Human Use of Human Beings, 1956, p.31.

possible, both literal and figurative, of the terms involved, metaphor provides a sense of the density and immediacy of experience. The element of sense-transference provides a means of extending the boundaries of meaning of a word, and hence also gives greater freedom of expression. At the same time considerable precision of expression is possible because of the complexity of the processes of relationship involved, and this freedom and definition can be applied to valuational, emotional and metaphysical terms because there is no specification of a literal term.

Returning to the definitions of symbol and metaphor given previously, the difference between Coleridge's "translucence" and Aristotle's "transference" may now be compared to the distinction of diaphor from epiphor. The processes of meaning in metaphor and in symbolisation are similar in their complexity and circularity. But there is clearly a difference between symbol and metaphor. M.H. Abrams, among others, says the difference is that in symbol there is no paired term, no replacement of a definite, unstated "proper" term, as there is in metaphor.[1] In poetic symbolism, Abrams says, the poet introduces a word or phrase signifying an object which itself has significance. As in the case of "Iron gates", many words are capable not only of referring to concrete phenomena, but also of relating them to some system of values so that the object can be described or referred to in such a way that the object is imbued with significance. This may be

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1 Literary Symbolism, ed. Maurice Beebe, 1960, p.18, also Christine Brooke-Rose, p.288 and John Unterecker, A Reader's Guide to W.B. Yeats, 1959, p.34.

compared with Barfield's conclusion[1] that words having immaterial reference could not have originated separately, but that most words must have begun as "vehicle" plus "tenor" and would have to achieve literalness; and with Cassirer's argument that significance came with signification. But, the argument from origins aside, it is clear that many words have both signification and significance because their meaning depends on the contexts in which we have experienced them. Moreover, as Winifred Nowottny says, we habitually read qualities such as grace, fury or tenderness into the world around us.[2] Analysing Shakespeare's sonnet no. 73, Miss Nowottny points out the difference between the initial pattern of the fading of life's brilliance and that which develops from it, of the inexorability of time and the consequent necessity to cherish the brilliance, noting that the second pattern inheres in the same particulars from which the first idea is abstracted. "Such particulars as 'ashes' and 'death bed'", she comments, "are used to focus our vision at points where these relationships criss-cross". In fact, the change is not quite so sudden as this suggests, but "ashes" in particular become the focal point of the development because, as line twelve explains, although they were originally fuel, once burnt they become stifling to the fire. Thus youth itself, because it is a function of time, leads to death. As Miss Nowottny says, "Ashes refer us out of the linguistic structure to an object which in real life is a crisis point"; the word here is "a

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1 Knights and Cottle, p.55.

2 Nowottny, p.115.

natural symbol with all the advantages over language of being in itself a simultaneity of opposites".[1]

The contrast of symbol with language is perhaps questionable,[2] but direct reference in literature to an object must leave the significance of the statement to be drawn from experience, which must in turn be matched against the context in which the object is presented. Whereas successful metaphor gives the reader the verbal clues necessary to perform the complex activity of interrelationship and in doing so cancels out some of its literal reference, symbol, whether on a small or a larger scale, depends on patterns of experience. Symbol, as Coleridge says, is the medium between the literal and the metaphorical.[3]

Christine Brooke-Rose suggests, however, that many so-called metaphors are not in fact metaphors at all, but are what she calls "literal symbols". In The Grammar of Metaphor she examines the metaphors of a wide selection of poets from Chaucer to Eliot and Yeats, classifying them according to their syntactical form. The two types which she finds to be anomalous are both noun-metaphors,[4] those

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1 Nowottny, p.85.

2 Consider, for instance, the word "still" in "move still, still so". Opposites can often be resolved dialectically into a more general category. But language is naturally more limited than experience.

3 Beebe, p.19.

4 Nouns are the more unstable element of language according to Miss Brooke-Rose because they are bundles of attributes, whereas verbs are behavioural, changing their meaning according to the noun with which they are linked but precise in themselves.

which she calls "Simple Replacement" metaphors and some of the "Genitive Link" metaphors. In the "Simple Replacement" type, the proper term of the metaphor is absent and the noun can also be taken literally, as in: "What matter if the ditches are impure?"; "A tree there is that from its topmost bough...".[1] In "Genitive Link" metaphors, particularly those using the preposition "of" and genitive compounds, the metaphor is not necessarily linked to its proper term but rather to a third term, giving the form: "A is the B of C". The A term is usually not mentioned, and where the noun can also be taken literally the metaphor becomes similar to the "Simple Replacement" type, as in "Monuments of unageing intellect"; "God's holy fire".[2]

These "literal symbol" metaphors may perhaps account for theories that the symbol in its full literary development is a kind of extended metaphor.[3] In any case, they do suggest a continuity between symbol and metaphor, parallel to that provided for by the diaphoric element in metaphor, namely that they are two modes of presenting and inducing a similar thought-process. It was stated earlier that metaphor has the capacity to extend the possibilities of language into areas of emotional and metaphysical relevance. There are corresponding views of symbolism which maintain that it is primarily (i) "an attempt by

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1 W.B. Yeats, Collected Poems, 1963 (hereafter referred to as C.P.), pp.266, 217.

2 Ibid., p.217.

3 E.g. Unterecker, p.34, Edmund Wilson, Axel's Castle, 1947, pp.21-2.

carefully studied means - a complicated association of ideas represented by a medley of metaphors - to communicate unique personal feelings",[1] or (ii) "the poet, through his use of myth and symbol, seeks to give expression to certain archetypal patterns of experience and to certain universal truths in terms of the particular time and place in which he finds himself", so that "poetry,...is concerned less with the small data of sensory observation or the memory of natural experience, than with the inner nature of life; less with individual vagaries of thought and feeling than with perennial issues".[2]

Both views begin from the assumption that symbol is a means of expression, of transmitting ideas known to the poet before the poem was created to express them. Neither gives an adequate conception of the relation between personal feelings and universal truth. To repeat in summary what was said in section one, only if the symbol in literature is regarded as a way of finding meaning in experience, the expression itself being the means to the discovery, can personal and universal experience, emotional and transcendent truth, be brought into focus in the imaginative act. Thus, the symbol is not only the finding of meaning in experience, it is the experience of finding meaning.

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1 E. Wilson, pp.21-2.

2 Philip Sherrard, The Marble Threshing Floor, 1956, p.242, quoted in J. Christopher Middleton, "Two Mountain Scenes in Novalis and the Question of Symbolic Style", Literary Symbolism, ed. Helmut Rehder, 1965, p.103.

Arthur Symons distinguishes the symbolist poets from earlier poets by the self-consciousness of their symbolism.[1] The artist's problem has always been the evolution of meaningful form, and literary style is symbolic in all its details as well as in the whole. But to use the inherent method of art consciously must tend to create an ambiguity of attitude. The modern writer deliberately exploits and experiments with language and his position equivocates between active formulation of meaning and the essential receptivity and "unknowingness" of the artistic process. Both were always present. Serious artists can rarely have been quite unconscious of technique, but in recent times the consciousness of writers has been directed at the process of meaning itself and therefore it tends to become both form and subject of their art. The dangers exist that the search for meaning, for pure form, will become all-absorbing or, conversely, that all meaning may be denied in a welter of particularity.

Yet the symbolist artist has the advantage of his recognition of language as formative of knowledge. If this is so, it must be possible to find the world, both material and immaterial, in language. The material world is given, and the artist makes use of the paradoxes and mysteries of experience to mirror his own questions, deliberately increasing the reference to the external world by making the words of the poem capable of being taken literally. Metaphor allows the artist to cut loose from literal reality and examine the frontier between mind

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1 The Symbolist Movement in Literature, 1899, pp.12-13.

and experience, but its conventional verbal status requires the assumption of the possibility of contact, however ambiguous. Where meaning is at stake a more radical encounter with reality is necessary, and the nature of metaphor must be adapted to accommodate it. Conscious symbolism requires the assertion of physical existence and experience to re-build its own image and re-work its own process.

Thus, in her counting of metaphors Christine Brooke-Rose found that, although the most frequently used type of metaphor in general was the "Genitive Link", with transitive verb metaphors not far behind, Eliot uses twice as many "Simple Replacements", and Yeats as many "Simple Replacements", as "Genitive Links". Most of the other poets did not use "Simple Replacements" in any outstanding numbers.

Finally, since the symbolic process is a dialectic of a kind between the author's spontaneous mental effort and his received perception of the world, the author's personality may be present in the work in a particular way. A work which has as its subject the symbolic process dramatises the author's effort; but the result is not merely personal to the author, because it represents a search for meaning which is universal. The achieved symbol has an autonomy in the same sense that language itself has autonomy, sharing the impersonality of a mode of knowledge.

## III. Criticism of Symbolism in Literature

Christine Brooke-Rose considers the Yeats/Eliot type of symbolic noun to be other than metaphoric because no

definite, unstated object is replaced, so that there is no transference of meaning except through the noun's connotations. "The poet simply mentions something", Miss Brooke-Rose says, "and various connotations arise in our minds, as they might if we ourselves saw the same thing in fact; or he makes them arise in our minds by mentioning it in a context of other objects".[1]

No doubt Miss Brooke-Rose did not intend the second statement to be read as a drastic revision of the first, but only as an alternative. Nevertheless, the two are incongruous in juxtaposition since the one implies almost no control of meaning on the poet's part, and the other a considerable amount of control. In fact the sentence reflects accurately a common attitude towards symbolism in literature. The suppositions Miss Brooke-Rose puts forward about the effects of the "literal symbol" type of metaphor are highly pertinent, particularly since Yeats is one of the major users of this type.

She says, in sum, that understanding of the "literal symbol" depends on (i) the reader, (ii) connotations, (iii) the context; that its use allows what happens in the poem to be taken literally, and also allows freedom of symbolic interpretation; and that ambiguity is its great strength, but that it must be readily understood or else it is obscure. Multivalency, ambiguity, obscurity: these are the characteristics which lie at the roots of most of those critical attitudes towards Yeats which I have claimed to be aberrant and confusing.

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1 Brooke-Rose, p.35.

Considering first the multivalency of symbolic "reference", if the "proper term" is not given, is the meaning therefore unlimited? Bernard Knieger, for instance, examining the nursery rhyme "Humpty Dumpty" concludes that "it is a symbol of sinful man, the meanings of which cannot be exhausted",[1] and he mentions the falls of Adam, Satan, Icarus, and Phaethon as part of its relevant meaning. This is an extreme example, and it is therefore a good one to begin from. It is extreme in its simplicity, which is of a kind that relates it to fable, ballad, and other "folk" literature. There is no doubt that the best of this literature possesses a resonant and haunting quality which is due to an authentic natural symbolism. The simplicity provides only the broadest limitations on the possible connotations of the individual word and on the general sense, and leaves the situation implied extremely vague. The poem can therefore be given to a child without fear that he will immediately abstract a single unpleasant meaning or apply it to a particular situation and therefore probably reject it. Instead, it can remain in the back of the mind, working as a guide line for future thought.

But can we accept Knieger's statement so simply? A child would not think of Knieger's mythological list, presumably, and adults do not often spend time on nursery rhymes. Is there no possibility of discussing such literature in a manner which is in any sense commensurate with our experience of it? And if it is read, and leads us to think about Adam, Satan and the others, are we still thinking about "Humpty Dumpty"?

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1 Beebe, pp.57-8.

Several commentators begin, reasonably enough, from a consideration of the reader's response to symbol. "It is the principle of involvement, of some degree of personal commitment, that makes symbols", L.C. Knights says,[1] and David Daiches agrees, though reversing the order.[2] The reader's response, he says, is to say that "We are implicated, we are involved; this man is living in our world and his fate is a human fate - not just related to us, but related to the human condition...". And, noting that understanding is achieved by an act of the reader's, Knights concludes that "the full meaning of the symbol - the generative power - only exists in so far as the individual's experience is affected".[3]

All this agrees broadly with much that has been said in the earlier sections about the process of symbolism. But then Daiches takes another step, saying that "Once true contact is made, once human commitment and implication are achieved, we are well away; the imagination cannot rest but echoes off into infinitely reverberating suggestions, reminiscences, glimpses of new meanings within meanings", and he quotes Yeats:

> Those images that yet
> Fresh images beget,
> That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea.[4]

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1 Knights and Cottle, p.140.

2 "Myth, Metaphor and Poetry", Essays by Divers Hands, ed. R. Church, 1965, p.46.

3 Knights and Cottle, p.138.

4 Church, p.47.

Daiches cites as an example some lines from Hamlet (I.i.166-7):

> But look, the morn, in russet mantle clad,
> Walks o'er the dew of yon high eastward hill.

The phrase "yon high eastward hill", he says, shines out

> with a mysterious emphasis to add a comment or a qualification or a series of suggestions that take us to all sorts of magic mountains, castles in Spain, haunts of gods and symbolic towers, so that the literate reader finds echoing somewhere in the penumbra of his consciousness lines such as
>
> Le Prince d'Aquitaine a la tour abolie
>
> and Where the great Vision of the guarded mount
> Looks towards Namancos and Bayona's hold
>
> and I declare this tower is my symbol; I declare
> This winding, gyring, spiring, treadmill of a
> stair is my ancestral stair;...[1]

Daiches has already described the lines as being a "symbolic image blending suggestions of hope and regeneration", and, though he does not, he might easily have pointed to their position in the scene from Hamlet. But is it in reading Hamlet that all these other lines come to mind, or is it rather when these lines are taken on their own, as in this example? Are these lines part of the meaning of Hamlet and vice versa, or it it just that Hamlet and the other poems may be talking about similar things at this point?

As with Humpty Dumpty and his illustrious predecessors, it would be possible to extract a phrase to

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[1] Church, p.47.

explain their similarity, e.g. "suggestions of hope and regeneration". But then, to take just the Yeats lines, if in "Blood and the Moon" the tower is a symbol of hope and regeneration, it is a very complex one, with many qualifications and adjuncts. In the lines quoted by Daiches it is clear that ideas of effort, of human striving, qualities of form, and a complex view of time are all involved in the poem's meaning. It is therefore merely the idea of the tower (or hill - something that serves as a focus of human aspirations) as a symbol that is relevant to both the Hamlet and the Yeats quotations; and similarly for the others.

If these other quotations were to be accepted as part of the work's general relevance, then there can be no limit to any work's possibilities. It must then be conceded that no interpretation of the work is possible since the number of possible interpretations is linked to the number of readers, and even to each separate occasion of reading. But at this stage the reading of the work is no longer really a process of understanding, but is instead merely an occasion of returning to the memory for purposes of private contemplation of a general kind. This is in fact what Daiches implied when he said that the reader recognises a human fate, a common bond in the human condition.

But, it will be argued, the general meaning is there to be taken, so that this is an understanding of the work. This is true, and is acceptable providing it is recognised to be only a logical abstraction from the whole, a "block" meaning dissected from the whole meaning process of the work. And the fragments from which the general idea was

abstracted can be seen, in the case of the Hamlet and Yeats lines discussed, to bear some relation to the whole. It has been said that in symbol the part equals the whole, but it is clear that it does so only insofar as we have the whole in mind when considering the part. If the part is taken, not as a representative of the whole, but as part of a new context, it becomes just a fragment, a unit of meaning.

"In literature", Knights says, "...the meaning of anything we recognise as a symbol is determined by a context".[1] He goes on:

> To be more exact, there are two overlapping contexts within which meaning takes place: there is the context from which the symbol emerges - namely the work within which it occurs, and the yet wider context of meaning which the artist draws on in making his work; and there is the context into which it enters - namely the moving and developing life of the person responding.

One may perhaps see three, not two, contexts here, but in any case Daiches was obviously considering the context of the reader's mind. Neither Daiches nor Knights makes clear how the different contexts are interrelated, and the result is that, although both are contextualist critics, neither comes to a firm statement resolving the paradox between "images that yet Fresh images beget" and their claims for the context of the work as the chief determinant of meaning. Knights, for instance, finding no paraphrasable meaning in symbol, but only the "direction of personality as a whole" previously noted, adds that this does not mean he has a preference for "floating and

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1 Knights and Cottle, p.136.

obscure generalities", but can only support his statement by affirming that

> When Coleridge spoke of ideas which may indeed be suggested and awakened, but cannot, like the images of sense and the conceptions of the understanding be adequately expressed by words, he was not turning his back on his life-long plea for habits of mental accuracy and verbal precision; he was merely reminding us that our habits of thought must be adequate to the material with which they profess to deal.[1]

Yet Knights himself had previously asserted that the symbol is an integral part of the work as a whole: "indeed it is obvious that in discussions of this kind it is only for convenience that we can refer to 'a symbol' as a sort of extractable unit in any work of imaginative literature".[2] The symbol in Blake's "The Tyger", he says, is not a tiger but the poem in toto, and he goes on to quote Marius Bewley, that "the symbolic process is not defined by the operation of some one overwhelming symbol ...but is a quality of imagery and organisation in the texture of the prose, gradually gathering towards a concentration of effect that is, in fact, a symbol although it may not overtly present itself as one".[3]

If this is the case, then there are not two or more separate contexts for the symbol, since the symbol is inseparable from the work. Thus, what enters the reader's experience and affects it when he is fully responding to the work must be the symbol as part of the work, not some

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1 Knights and Cottle, p.143.

2 Ibid., p.136.

3 Ibid., p.136, and The Eccentric Design, 1959, p.106.

block unit taken out of the work and regarded as more or less autonomous. The contexts Knights defines are not really of the same kind. Although there is a response to the symbol in the reader's mind which is a necessary part of the finding of meaning, this response must be referred back to the poem, and the context of the work must decide what is relevant in the response and what is not, by a process similar to that described in the case of the metaphor "the Iron gates of Life". A "meaning" that emerges for the reader from pure reverie may be very important to him but is not guaranteed to be connected with the poem.

Thus, although each separate reader will respond to the work somewhat differently according to his previous knowledge and experience, the variation is controlled by the context of the work. One measure of the successfulness of the work may be gauged by the degree to which it does control our responses to achieve a satisfying unity. To separate a "context of the reader's mind" is to split off the process of meaning into subject and object. Once the necessary interaction is denied, the process loses all meaning and can no longer be limited or described. But the symbol is more adequately determinable. There is a context which is common to all readers, and that is a response to the work which refers at all points to the work. This is the only one that can be discussed with immediate relevance and, if it is to mediate contact with a reader at all, it must be sufficient at least to guide our thoughts and responses to the symbol. "Poetry

succeeds because all or most of what is said or implied is relevant".[1]

Taken as part of the context of the reader's mind, the symbol becomes a fragment which, as in Daiches's example, may lose much of the meaning which it actuated when in its context in the work. Has the "yet wider context of meaning which the artist draws on in making his work" any greater relevance? Poetry or other literature must be taken to be intentional if it is to be considered as a human expression of any kind, and if it is to be discussed meaningfully.[2] But that intention is indeterminable[3] except as it appears within the work. Therefore to return to the wider context which the artist drew on in making the work or to look at the artist's mind or background for information about the work is bound to be inconclusive. No certain connection can be made between such external information and the text. Objects, events and people in literature have only those characteristics which the context creates; Lady Macbeth's children need not be a subject for speculation.[4]

Although we must infer intention in the artist and assume that everything that is in the work is in it "by the poet's specific act of choice",[5] it is not therefore

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1 Wimsatt, The Verbal Icon, p.3.

2 John Ciardi, in Beebe, p.69.

3 D.W. Harding, Experience into Words, p.164.

4 L.C. Knights, "How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?", Explorations, Penguin, pp.13-50.

5 Ciardi, Beebe, p.69.

necessary to deny that the author's method of writing may not be entirely conscious. We may agree, for instance, with D.W. Harding's finding that Shelley "uses accidents of language, while partially surrendering to them, as a means of discovering and releasing party-formed ideas and attitudes".[1] It may also be possible that a reader will find connotations and associations within the work which the artist had not recognised, since the artist is not using language as a tool for expressing a logical development of ideas and attitudes but as a means of discovering and integrating meanings. But the only way in which such interpretations of a work can be shown to be relevant is, as before, to demonstrate their relevance to the whole context of the work.

"Writers differ in the extent to which they allow the less defined and less well controlled meanings and associations of words to [affect] what they finally write",[2] as Harding says, and symbolist poets, by their very approach, are more liable to exploit the connotative possibilities of language. Winifred Nowottny suggests that the aim of many symbolist poets has been to preserve the absolute freedom and undifferentiation of the symbolic object through the use of "bare", "pure" language. The simple vocabulary, like the simple form, permits a wide variation of meanings and associations, facilitating the production of double meanings. Yeats's later poetry affords many examples of deliberately ambiguous usages of this kind:

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[1] Knights and Cottle, p.18, Experience into Words, p.190.

[2] Experience into Words, p.172.

"cast a...jet" ("Blood and the Moon"); "put down", "put off", "trace" ("The Statues"); "That juggling nature mounts" ("Supernatural Songs"); "A living man is blind and drinks his drop" ("A Dialogue of Self and Soul").

Ambiguities such as these support, and are indeed part of, the total ambiguity of the symbol. Their simplicity is deceptive, but their quality of directness and plain-spokenness not only attracts the eye but also contributes to an effect of spontaneous realism. Christine Brooke-Rose notes this effect in the "literal symbols" with which she deals but does not allow it sufficient weight in her final judgment. For instance, such "Simple Replacement" nouns as "the winding ancient stair", "the crumbling battlement", "the star that marks the hidden pole" of "A Dialogue of Self and Soul", she says, "may or may not 'stand' for something else. And of course it hardly matters since the whole purpose is evocation of an 'image' with whatever symbolism we may subjectively glimpse".[1] But the poem is not so loosely designed as this would suggest. If it were only because the stanza is attributed to "My Soul" and ends with the line "Who can distinguish darkness from the soul?", a broader reference must be inferred. This indication is not subjective, and neither, I would suggest, is the pattern of the focussing of the attention to achieve a state of mystical contemplation which emerges as the total effect of the stanza (see discussion, pp.137-140).

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1 Brooke-Rose, p.67.

Again, Miss Brooke-Rose says of the "Genitive Link" metaphor "monuments of unageing intellect" that the meaning is "clear from the general context, but not strictly speaking, from the relationship between the two terms, which is barely metaphoric and ambiguous...; intellect produces monuments (i.e. works of art etc.), but the phrase itself could just about mean real monuments of an unageing intellectual quality, or real buildings produced by intellect".[1] Miss Brooke-Rose here admits the restrictions due to the comminutive effect of her syntactical method, but when she adds that the ambiguities are present "from a strictly analytical, rather than a common-sense point of view" she oversteps the point through her very exactness. In this poem Yeats is making use of just this ambiguity. He wants his metaphors to be both general and solid, and not merely for a trompe l'oeuil effect, to pass his abstractions off as poetry. "Sailing to Byzantium" as a whole exploits precisely this combination of real and imaginary, literal and metaphorical.

Miss Brooke-Rose is consistently ambivalent in her attitude towards the introduction of "real things" into poetry. For Blake's "Song of the Happy Shepherd" she considers it to be an advantage that it can also be taken literally, but in most cases she finds literalness less effective than metaphor because "the double meaning essential to metaphor is lost or depends on us".[2] Hence the rise of the term "image", she suggests, for "something visualised, but for which language is not made to work

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1 Brooke-Rose, p.151.

2 Ibid., p.31.

metaphorically". "The 'image' depends more on extrinsic circumstances, such as the general context and other 'images', than on the words in the sentence which express it".[1] Miss Brooke-Rose will not accept that such indications can give a clear idea of the double meaning, and this may be partly because she does not think of the metaphor's meaning as being suggested or formulated rather than given. She insists instead that "Simple Replacements" have only "outside associations which give us a feeling of symbolism",[2] but she makes no attempt to define such associations, just as she brushes aside the effects of context.

In earlier poets "Simple Replacements" were used more as emblems, often in conjunction with other metaphors in a kind of allegory with one connection explained. The modern poets studied by Miss Brooke-Rose, however, tend to use words which are less obviously figurative and to employ juxtaposition as a major principle of organisation of meaning. Obviously, this is one method of achieving control by context, and Yeats, as Miss Brooke-Rose notes, often uses groups of "Simple Replacements" in apposition. Yeats, she finds, "exploits the formal possibilities of English syntax more than any other modern poet, going back to Donne, for instance, much more constructively than Eliot does,..."[3], especially in his use of a syllogistic form of parallelism with a repeated or synonymous action.

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1 Brooke-Rose, p.67.

2 Ibid., p.34.

3 Ibid., p.317, e.g. "Conjunctions", "Veronica's Napkin", C.P., pp.333, 270.

In conjunction with his "Simple Replacements" Yeats often uses a demonstrative with a further qualifying phrase as substitution for a stated antecedent, or he may use a qualifying phrase or adjective to deny the literal meaning of a noun.[1] Yeats "avoids both Blake's ambiguities and Keats' excesses with the Genitive Link", Miss Brooke-Rose comments. "His vision is much less fragmentary and confused, his use of language much purer".[2]

In fact, Yeats uses a great many syntactical methods of controlling meaning, apart from control produced by rhythm, rhyme, and devices such as the grouping of a number of short poems to form one long poem with internal patterns of contrast, parallelism and balance. Despite all this Miss Brooke-Rose claims that Yeats "relies a great deal on the reader to know the symbolic meaning of words he uses literally",[3] thus revealing once more that she regards symbolic meaning as referential, a vaguer form of emblem-meaning, perhaps. I would suggest that, while Yeats does make use of traditional symbols, neither he nor any poet could use such symbols purely in a traditional way and still write symbolic poetry, because in poetry, if the symbol is to be considered as such, it must be active within the context of the poem. J. Christopher Middleton

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1 Brooke-Rose, p.315, e.g. "Burke that proved the State a tree, That this unconquerable labyrinth of the birds...", C.P., p.268, "Flames that no faggot feeds, nor steel has lit,....An Agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve", C.P., p.281.

2 Brooke-Rose, p.317.

3 Ibid., p.317.

suggests[1] that "poetic symbols are active in a way that others are not, not even the complex traditional symbols in nonimaginative contexts".

If this is so, and the theory of symbolism certainly supports it, the question of obscurity and ambiguity must be related primarily to the understanding of the context. Although meaning does depend on the reader, it depends even more on the control produced by the context, since most words have a range of meaning and association. Similarly, if the meaning of Yeats's poems depends on a knowledge of the body of his work, as Miss Brooke-Rose, following many other critics,[2] suggests, it must depend on it only for referential meaning. That is, meanings and associations of words from other poems or external sources such as A Vision have only the same status as the normal meanings which the word has for us, being part of the broad connotative reference of the word which must be defined and adjusted to the requirements of the particular experience of the poem in question. The process of definition must be determined by the limitations imposed within the work itself, acting within the bounds of common knowledge, if it is to be accepted and responded to as a constitutive symbol and not a referential discourse.

The writer may base his work on a literary symbol evolved elsewhere, but if it is not created or re-created effectively within the present work for that work to

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1 Rehder, p.103.

2 Unterecker, Introduction to Yeats, Twentieth Century Views, pp.1-6, G.S. Fraser, Vision and Rhetoric, 1959, M.I. Seiden, W.B. Yeats. The Poet as Mythmaker, 1962; see later discussions.

function as a creative action of the mind, then the present work can only be regarded, where this symbol is concerned, as an extension of that in which the symbol was first created, and, as such, it will almost certainly have no satisfactory meaning.

Allusiveness is established, Winifred Nowottny argues,[1] if it is possible for the reader to be aware of it and if it can be shown to work in the poem; that is to say, if it has relevance for the poem and if it is part of the common connotative range of the word or phrase making the allusion. The area of relevance of allusion may be more complex in general than that of a word-connotation, being perhaps an intricate nexus of valuational and emotional, as well as simple reference, components, but the same qualifications apply: that it must be possible to set it in the context of the work and thereby achieve a deepening of the work's meaning without introducing ideas which point beyond the work.

Where allusion depends on something other than common knowledge, it must be made clear by specific reference forewarning the reader of the particular knowledge required of him, or else it may destroy the poem's action. The work cannot function as a correlator of subject and object if it is so opaque as to be totally incomprehensible. The range of the comprehensible in the arts, however, is not what it is in logical discourse. Metaphor and symbol can produce highly complex patterns of inter-relation of ideas giving precise

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1 Nowottny, p.201.

notions which are only with difficulty definable in logical terms because they are not the result of a simple logical process, and because they have a tonal quality, consisting of emotional as well as logical factors. But because such ideas are not totally amenable to paraphrase, they are not necessarily totally unparaphrasable. In fact, although mathematically the logical equivalent of a re-circulative process may be an infinite series of statements, practically, the major statements within the area of reference of the immediate work can be made, with the provision that others are always possible. As Eliseo Vivas says, it is not a question of either/or, but always of more or less:

> all sorts of indications can be given the reader as to what he will find....But ultimately he has to go it alone and enter into the kind of transaction with it that is the aesthetic apprehension of the intransitive and the immanent grasp of its meanings.[1]

Christine Brooke-Rose's mistrust of symbolism caused her uncertainty as to whether the symbol's meaning is totally subjective or whether it is determined by the artist, alternatives which are not acceptable because we must assume meaningfulness, intention, although it cannot be determined except as the work itself produces meaning. The searching into the artist's mind, into his mental and physical background, and into the esoteric reaches of the disciplines and philosophies he espoused, also reflect mistrust of the symbolic process and are the result of looking for certainty and for simple reference meaning in

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[1] Vivas, p.286.

something beyond the work. Such knowledge can only deepen understanding of the work in so far as we are willing to return with it to the aesthetic "transaction" that Vivas proposes, and it must not be allowed to distract attention from that transaction if it is to succeed in the creation of meaning. Negative capability is one half of the "act of pure attention", imaginative grasp the other.

# CHAPTER II

## CRITICISM OF YEATS'S POETRY

### I. General Introduction

Many of the critics who have written on Yeats's poetry show the results of mistrusting the poems, as if they had a feeling of meaning from them but without being able to explain it or, it may be, accept it. Because they believe that the symbol is indefinable in subject and operation, and suspect with Christine Brooke-Rose that in symbolic poetry the poet simply mentions something and various connotations arise in the mind, and because they are unhappy about the unexpectedness and unconventionality of the ideas they find in the poems, they look for background to support the poetry, for a body of knowledge and tradition behind it or for explanations in Yeats's life or habits of thought.

It may be convenient to list here the various courses of recoil from the poetry:

(i) Looking at the poet's mind on the assumption that the poem is the expression of what was in his mind, and hence that the poem has a direct reference meaning. Understanding of the poet's method of composition is often substituted for outright intentionalism, and the subtlest approach of this kind looks for the meaning of a passage by examining the drafts of the poem to see how the poet modified and developed his ideas. This may provide a valid means of discovering important facts about the

poet's method and in some instances it could resolve a problem in the final version, but if it is absolutely necessary to turn to the draft in this way the poem is to that extent unsatisfactory. Yeats's style in his later verse is, however, generally clear-cut and precise, not only in diction and syntax, but also in his use of imagery. He is not given to precipitating images and then modifying them with another almost before they have had time to crystallise, as D.W. Harding demonstrated in Shelley and Shakespeare.[1] Although he may have a high density of images within the space of a few lines, Yeats does not fuse them so closely as to be inseparable, and they are often repeated in new ways later in the poem so that the images inter-relate, as in a hall of mirrors, but do not blur into one another and lose focus. The effect may well be connected with his use of literal symbols, which have the solidity of objects rather than the fluidity and fleeting impressions of metaphor.

(ii) Relating the poems to the disciplines and philosophies professed or adopted by the poet, implying that the poem has a reference connection with these ideas and can be interpreted by knowing them. That is to say, it is assumed that it is possible to go from the poetry to the discipline for explanation and understanding of the poem without re-focussing on the particular experience it presents.

(iii) Extracting symbols from the poems and discussing them separately or comparing them with symbols

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1 In "The Hinterland of Thought", Experience into Words and Knights and Cottle. (These are the main illustrations of the essay's thesis).

from elsewhere. The symbols are treated as emblems, traditional symbols, or archetypes. It is assumed that the symbol outside the poem is the same as within it: that its meaning is separable from its enactment in the poem. Since the alchemical and theosophical doctrines which Yeats absorbed and made use of consist largely of elaborate configurations of symbols and emblems, this is often identical with (ii) above. It is not necessary to deny that an artist may use a traditional symbol, say, in a manner which gives a similar general meaning, as with Daiches's echoes of towers and hills. the danger of the approach is that the particular embodiment in the poem will not receive the attention necessary to succeed as symbolic process and the overtones will be lost beneath those of other syntheses.

(iv) Extracting symbols from the poems and comparing them with symbols from other works of the same author. This is akin to (i), the study of the working of the poet's mind, and it implies that the artist is using words in special ways which are not available to the general understanding, and that his ideas have block values which may be substituted in any context. In its extreme this implies that the artist is writing one great work in which he "expresses" or embodies all his philosophy and that each small work is incomplete in itself. This is often conflated with the reverse process of relating the individual poems to a wider pattern of development or experience in the poet's life, but is not the same since the latter need not imply a restrictive attitude towards the individual poems.

A number of critics turn to mythology as a covering explanation of Yeats's poetic. The conception of mythology varies from critic to critic, but the most common assumption is that Yeats was building up a personal mythology, a whole of meaning towards which the poems, plays and other works contribute. A Vision is often taken to represent the basis of this mythology, and the poems are therefore interpreted according to its theories or the theories which lay behind it. A Vision on its own, however, is not usually satisfactory for this purpose, and since the poems are being viewed as reference functions of its meaning they are not considered as standing alone, leaving the critic to turn to any other available background material as a prop for meaning.

The question of the nature of myth and its relation to literature is too complex to be considered in detail here, but it is clear that if myth is taken to be a conceptual grouping divorced from any specific artistic formulation as Knieger, for instance, implies when he considers the falls of Adam, Icarus, etc. to be existent for us apart from any particular literary embodiment of their stories, then myth falls under the same category as traditional symbolism (i.e. it is only relevant to a work of literature insofar as it can be telescoped back into the work without introducing new concepts and only as it furthers the suggestions of the original work).

Daiches[1] regards myth in this way. It is dependent only on content, he maintains, and is not an amalgam of

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[1] "Myth, Metaphor and Poetry", in Church, p.49.

form and content as literature is. Hence, he argues, the attempt to fit literary works to the pattern of recognised myths results in reducing the works to their paraphrasable meaning, as was noted with "Humpty Dumpty". What Daiches does not consider is that by the act of substitution both the literature and the myths are being treated as content only. Daiches sees myth as relating man to nature, whereas literature relates man to man and to the history of human experience. Both have the function of de-neutralising the universe by implicating man, but myth aims at enabling man to come to terms with the terrifyingly impersonal forces of nature, whereas poetry tries to maximise human meanings in a situation involving human experience.

Analogous to this view is the confusion between myth as story and myth as a direct response to experience of the "other" which leads Harold H. Watts to contrast Yeats's use of "lapsed" Celtic and other mythologies unfavourably with the myths as spontaneous, because the modern usage has a symbolic function not present in the original which, he argues, meant what it said and not "something which one must grasp and partly elucidate".[1] This position, unlike that of Cassirer, is divisive, permitting no correlation between myth as response and myth as story. Hence Watts's later statement that myth is "an unreflectively achieved perception of the mysterious and uncontrollable, a perception integrated into the structure of tale and legend as uncalculatingly as, say, were the material details of food preparation...that we find in the story of Bricriu's feast". Clearly, Watts is here regarding the

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[1] Hound and Quarry, 1953, pp.178-9.

stories and their mythical content as separate entities, and yet he began by referring generally to a "corpus of stories about gods". The very fact that myth appeared in the form of tales and legends suggests that there was among the ancient believers a parallel usage to the modern, and, perhaps, as much of a desire to understand their experience rather than simply to respond to it.

An exactly opposite view is presented by John Holloway,[1] who stresses the active concept of myth held by anthropologists. To them, the function of myth is not to answer questions about the nature of the world, but to contribute to or sustain some reality current in society. The mythical consciousness suggested by Cassirer is too abstract a concept, Holloway believes. What is important about myth, he argues, is its social function, moulding, controlling and sustaining the way men live. Myths are seen "less as statements than as agents in their societies; less as offering explanations than as exercising power".[2]

The more myth is seen as communal action rather than as mental process the closer it is to literature, at least as drama and epic. But Holloway does not want to abandon reference value in myth or literature completely, and having ruled out symbolism he is caught with the dualist problem of accommodating the emotional effects of literature in a theory which depends on its conveying meaning. If literature is also taken to be a mode of

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1 "The Concept of Myth in Literature", Knights and Cottle, pp.120-134.

2 Ibid., p.125.

action it can account for both extremes and for both of Daiches's opposites. Even as controller and sustainer of social bonds and mores myth must also function, as Holloway himself says, as manifesting certain facts of life in a controlled form. If it is accepted as providing understanding through meaningful experience rather than explanation of a direct aetiological kind, then both community action and individual mental action are accommodated. Poetry is then, perhaps, a less immediately communal and physical form of such activity, exploiting (and creating) the complexity and flexibility of language to allow subtler and more personal reactions to the "formidable and haunting ideas of existence" to be transmitted and understood.

Through his personal symbolic experience, the poet shares the burden of the forces imposed on man by nature and by society, regarding them all as personal in the sense of being actions between personal agents, each capable of meaningful action, and hence as having human significance. The makers of myths presumably acted in a similar way but less individually, being part of a tradition shared, perhaps, by a greater proportion of society. The less immediate the community a poet has, the more his experience as representative man becomes important. Yeats was greatly influenced by and made great use of a tradition which is not the major tradition of most of his natural community. If his experience and vital interest were contained within the limits of this tradition it would perhaps be necessary to say that he was lost except as a translated poet to western society in this century. But this is not the whole truth. Yeats's central theme is the ancient one of the dilemma of the

human condition, and his handling of it shows full consciousness of the human side of the balance. Where, as in "Supernatural Songs" or "The Statues", esoteric lore or personal interpretations of history play some part, still the same basic human concerns persist; although the view is unfamiliar, it is not unrecognisable.

Critics who assume or suggest that Yeats was attempting to create a comprehensive personal mythology are justified in the broad sense that he tried to see existence as a unified, meaningful whole, but to regard the "mythology" as fixed and the poetry as explanatory units within it is to accept the aetiological definition of mythology and to ignore its active communal functioning. Mythology in its sophisticated literary state cannot differ so utterly from the anthropologist's experience of it as to cancel all likeness. But this very indefiniteness of term vitiates the usefulness of "mythology" as a critical concept and it is generally used as vaguely and ambiguously as is "symbol" itself.

These are the major patterns of Yeats criticism. Individual critics introduce new problems, but so many follow either one or more of these paths that it should be possible to discuss them in these terms. Naturally, they will not conform to so simple a scheme, but as far as possible critics with similar leanings will be discussed in succession or conjunction.

## II. Symbols from Art, Philosophy and Magic

One writer who is avowedly interested in the workings of the poet's mind is Giorgio Melchiori: "my aim is not so much to point out the sources of different poems and to

explain their meaning, as to discover and trace, as far as this is possible, the mental process by which they have come into being".[1] Melchiori is aware that the symbol in literature is constitutive and not referential, and he also suggests that Yeats transformed the cult of form and formal arrangement of Pater and his followers into a conception of pattern and style as the basis of symbolism, but he does not put the two together to suggest that style and form in a work of art (i.e. context) can determine the symbolism of the work. Instead he concludes that

> The overall meaning of a symbol is therefore of itself undefinable: separate facets of it can perhaps be logically explored; but the symbol in its complex unity can be apprehended only through the emotion it communicates, through the feeling it awakens, acting on our senses. It is not so much the sensuous representation of a complex idea, as the immediate blending of sensuous impression, feeling and thought: it is the intuition of a complex idea through our physical senses.[2]

This statement, with its heavy emphasis on intuition, sensing and feeling leads away from any possibility of approaching the symbol through its manifestation, pointing instead towards that undefinable content which Melchiori calls "invisible essence" or "spiritual essence".

This assumption that the effect of symbolism is nebulously emotional and sensual and therefore ineffable inevitably causes Melchiori to ignore his statement that "separate facets of...[the symbol] can perhaps be logically explored", and his concentration on the

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[1] The Whole Mystery of Art, 1960, p.1.

[2] Ibid., p.15.

"spiritual flame" within the "transparent lamp"[1] blinds him to the possibility of examining the physical fact which embodies and transmits the light. And because he pays no attention to the form of the symbols, but only to their content, Melchiori does not distinguish between the symbol in poetry and the symbol elsewhere.

Speaking of some bookplate designs made by T. Sturge Moore for Yeats which were discussed in the correspondence between them, Melchiori comments:

> What these letters demonstrate is the instability of symbols even when the underlying idea is the same. This instability, united with the bewildering pluri-significance of each symbolic image, makes it hard to find logical consistency in the works of poets like Blake or Yeats.[2]

The bookplate emblems are discussed in the same way as the literary symbolism of the poetry. Melchiori finds the emblem's meaning to vary from person to person and from time to time and imputes the same instability to the poetry despite its utterly different nature. It may be that great art can control and determine its symbolism as subtly as can great literature, but the means must be so different as to make the comparison virtually meaningless. Moreover, these bookplates are a deceptive example because they are more nearly akin to "Humpty Dumpty" than to the poetry of Yeats or Blake. Even poems like "Old Tom Again", "Symbols" and "Statistics"[3] produce more

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1 Melchiori, p.2.

2 Ibid., p.3.

3 C.P., pp.306, 270, 271.

limitation on the possible meanings of the symbolism than do these bookplates. They are not allegorical emblems but are most like that "bare, pure language" of the symbolist poets which was designed to be as unrestrictive in its suggestions as possible.

The inconsistency and variability of which Melchiori complains may be caused less by an actual lack of logic in the works than by looking for it in the wrong place. By taking the literary symbols out of context, Melchiori strips them of structure and precision. To ask of such symbols logical consistency is virtually to demand logical consistency of man's mind and experience. Bare symbols of this kind only achieve stability of reference when they are part of an enduring and significant system of human values or else when they have lost all but their reference value.

Melchiori's thesis is based on this conception of the inter-relation of art and literature, and hence he is committed either to a reductive view of symbolism or else to the speculation and vagueness inherent in the comparison of two art forms. Melchiori's argument is that art is essentially order, pattern, "and the pattern itself is not superimposed afterwards, is not a metrical scheme or a technical device: it is a form of mental organization developed by the poet at the same time as he was gathering, more or less unconsciously, the materials from which the poem is born".[1] Therefore he proposes to "enquire into the mental pattern upon which Yeats's poetry is built", and adds, "I may as well state that I suspect

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1 Melchiori, p.113.

that this mental pattern had, in Yeats's case, a strong visual basis: that it approached a geometrical scheme".[1]

The evidence which Melchiori produces to demonstrate this thesis must necessarily be hypothetical in the absence of the poet's direct commentary (and even that could be questioned). Melchiori admits this, but nevertheless he ends by drawing conclusions which, by implication, are not speculative, apparently on the assumption that a sufficient accumulation of speculative evidence will add up to a logically conclusive argument. He begins with some solid evidence for supposing that Yeats was interested in visual symbolism and stylised pattern: that he was son and brother to artists and had studied art himself; that he was influenced by the pre-Raphaelites and the aesthetes; that he was deeply interested in Celtic myths, magic and theosophy; and that he was influenced by Blake. This is all fair enough, but when he comes to the demonstration, essential to his purpose, of the connection between these influences and Yeats's work, Melchiori's method of argument becomes less convincing. Repeatedly throughout the book, having produced the evidence to support a certain hypothesis, he transforms the theory without further ado into a truth. "It is only a hypothesis", he says at one point,

> but it seems to me worth entertaining. It would prove that poetry, for Yeats at least, was the slow maturation of the seeds sown in his mind during his youthful years:....Perhaps the strength and beauty of his mature poetry lies partly in the fact that it has such deep roots

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1 Melchiori, p.3.

> in his own past intellectual experiences. This is what gives it that tone of serene though passionate assurance - ....[1]

Or again, proposing "a probable unconscious reminiscence" of Spenser's description of Leda (Faerie Queene, III, xi, 32) behind Yeats's sonnet "Leda and the Swan", Melchiori says:

> Spenser's "rusht" may be responsible for the "white rush" of the sonnet, the bird's breast is as prominent, and...it is perhaps not unreasonable to think that Spenser's military metaphor ("inuade") may have confirmed Yeats in his idea of associating the Leda myth with war.
>
> Yeats's reminiscences of the swan passage in Spenser ran together in his mind with recollections of another work....[2]

But the most striking example of this advance from theory to certainty is Melchiori's main conclusion which transforms the original hypothesis to: "in the case of Yeats, the first impulse towards the creation of poetry is visual rather than intellectual - that is to say it comes from the senses; and only later the poet's mind erects round this seminal impulse an elaborate structure of thought".[3]

First, such a conclusion is totally inaccessible by the methods Melchiori has applied except as a statement of probability, and even so, the visual influences adduced by Melchiori are far outnumbered and outweighed by the literary sources he suggests. It may be that within this

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1 Melchiori, p.147.

2 Ibid., p.113.

3 Ibid., p.270.

literary material the sensuous effects and imagery are the most striking, but this could not possibly prove its primacy in the poet's mind.

Melchiori is fully conscious of the need to demonstrate that the poet saw the source material in question; indeed he is sometimes encouraged to include as source-material things which the poet certainly saw, but which have little or no connection with the work supposedly derived from them:

> It is not surprising, then, that while Yeats was looking for a bird symbol of solitude, he should have remembered Alastor's swan (11.275-9):
>
> ...A swan was there,
> Beside a sluggish stream among the reeds.
> It rose as he approached, and with strong wings
> Scaling the upward sky, bent its bright course
> High over the immeasurable main.
>
> It should be noticed that in Shelley the image of the swan is far less powerful than in Yeats, and there are no close verbal similarities. Besides, Shelley's swan is not an emblem of solitude, but provides a contrast with it.[1]

However, some of the influences Melchiori suggests are much more probable; for instance:

> The reading of Gogarty's Offering of Swans [sic], coming at a time when Yeats was looking for a new "metaphor" on which to build a poem, and by appealing to him with images with which he was already familiar (Helen, the Fall of Troy, and the swan symbol), suggested the possibility of concentrating them in a single myth: that of Leda and the Swan. And it suggested also the portentous consequences of the union of woman and bird.[2]

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1 Melchiori, pp.106-7.

2 Ibid., p.97.

As Yeats was writing the preface and helping to print Gogarty's book of poems at the time when he wrote the Leda sonnet, it is most probable that he was to some extent influenced by these poems, but to what extent?

Melchiori is quite sure of the way in which Yeats's mind worked, but in fact there is nothing in the Gogarty poems quoted by Melchiori to suggest Leda and the Swan as the dominant myth, nor any direct association of the "portentous consequences of the union", except for the rather flippant line: "And the twin Sportsmen were begotten". It certainly suggests that Yeats's imagination did not produce images out of the air without any stimulation, but this would be fairly safe to assume in any case. The greatest single result of this comparison otherwise is to demonstrate conspicuously the difference between a minor and a major poet.

If the poems had been more equal in quality and idea it might have been possible to make a close comparison which would have been more specifically illuminating to the workings of Yeats's mind, but Melchiori is not interested in such an approach in any case. Beginning with the assumption that Yeats was "looking for a new 'metaphor' on which to build a poem" (~~any poem, apparently, since Melchiori is sure Yeats did not start with an idea in mind~~), Melchiori then proposes to trace out the other influences bearing on the poem:

> The mental process did not stop at this point. An Offering of Swans was only the catalyst. Its mere presence set in motion a whole chain of unconscious reactions, of mental associations,

> fusing together and bringing to light a wealth of literary and visual reminiscences,...[1]

amongst which are Shelley, Spenser (see above), Francesco Colonna's Hypnerotomachia Pholiphili, William Morris, D.G. Rossetti, Oscar Wilde, Madame Blavatsky, and others, swan images and appearances of Helen in Yeats's own poetry, and finally some pictures and statuary of Leda and her swan.

All this material does demonstrate that certain attitudes and conceptions remained with Yeats and re-occurred to him over a long period of time, that he shared the interest of many of his contemporaries in Helen, and that she and Leda were, for him, focal points in Greek mythology. But most of this could have been discovered by looking at the poems themselves, and if we were to look at the actual process of making the poem we would need to know a great deal more even than this. How can we be certain, for instance, that Yeats was actually influenced by the material in question when writing the poem even if we are certain that he saw it? How do we know that there are not a great many other things which he saw or read and which might have exerted an even stronger influence?

The certainty which Mr Melchiori projects so confidently is entirely illusory. Finally, the only arbiter is the poetry itself, and the only justification for looking at the poet's mind, other than the psychological or biographical, is for its relation to the poetry. But this last is a dangerous proceeding; for the

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[1] Melchiori, p.98.

result of looking away from the poetry is, as might be expected, that the poems are rarely touched on for themselves, and when they are they are not often illuminated, and may even be confused, as in the following examples.

> The presence of the tower symbol in "Leda and the Swan",..., is more than a vivid metaphor for the invasion of the stronghold of Leda's chastity, "the broken wall", it is more than a reference to the fall of Troy, it is an imaginative re-inforcement of the basic meaning of the poem (the advent of a new cycle of civilisation) while at the same time bringing to bear on it a whole series of other significances.[1]

Melchiori arrives at this by taking into consideration Yeats's use of tower imagery and its sources, including "Prince Athanase", the Chymical Marriage of Christian Rosencreutz, the twenty-first trump in the Tarot pack (the lightning-struck tower), and his wife's bookplate with unicorn and tower. Melchiori claims that this is all somehow connected with the "presence of the tower symbol in "Leda and the Swan", but this does not accord with the poem. There the tower is only one element in the lines which describe the fall of Troy:

> The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
> And Agamemnon dead....

The suggestion of tremendous consequences is present in the whole of these lines, not merely in one word. The word "tower" is not even particularly stressed in the descriptive sequence. Despite its terminal position, it does not excite the imagination on its own, as a separate

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[1] Melchiori, p.132.

symbol. It is here no stronger in imaginative suggestion than "broken wall" or than the contrasted immobility and finality of "And Agamemnon dead".

Dealing with the same poem, Melchiori derives a complicated group of associations for the line "So mastered by the brute blood of the air" including Mme. Blavatsky's The Secret Doctrine, the occult system of Cornelius Agrippa, and William Blake's Jerusalem and The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, then comments:

> This accounts for the line...: the Swan is both Air and Blood. It relates to the ancient theory of the correspondences between the "elements" and the "humours", which Yeats and Ellis quote directly from Cornelius Agrippa when commenting on Blake's visionary figure of Luvah:

Melchiori here quotes a passage from the edition of The Works of William Blake:

> This correspondence of the emotional life with air is a part of the occult system of Cornelius Agrippa. The "Humours", he writes, "partake of the elements, for yellow choller is instead of fire, blood instead of air, flegme instead of water and black choller instead of earth". (Italics Yeats's).[1]

However this may "account" for the line from the poem, it does not give anything akin to the meaning which arises naturally from the poem. There is some meaning in saying that the swan is both air and blood but to impute to the poem correspondences between the "elements" and the "humours" is to introduce ideas quite foreign to the main force of the poem, ideas which are almost at the level of

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[1] Melchiori, p.144.

irrelevant punning. Yeats's comment (written in 1893) might be said to indicate that such a correspondence could possibly have been in his mind when he wrote the poem, but, if so, it is thoroughly subordinated to the immediate experience which the poem so expertly brings to the reader. It is an essential falsification of the awe and sense of wonder at the revealing of a mystery to muddy it up with intricate cross-references. If they are to be made, it must be to the poem as part of the individual reader's mental reserve, and hence to the poem as reference material, not as part of the reading of the poem.

The poems suffer in much the same way in the work of another critic who persistently looks towards the poet's mind and interests rather than at the poems: T.R. Henn. Henn begins as an apologist for Yeats the man and for his philosophies, allegiances and actions. The poetry appears largely secondary to this purpose although it is assumed that it also requires defence. For instance, explaining Yeats's use of his tower-home as a symbol, Henn says:

> A ruined castle,...in Ireland, could be bought for thirty pounds and become a dominant symbol with memories of Spenser, Herbert, Thomson, Shelley:
>
> There, on blood-saturated ground, have stood
> Soldier, assassin, executioner,
> Whether for daily pittance or in blind fear
> Or out of abstract hatred, and shed blood...
>
> It is something that is easy to stigmatise as fantasy, escapism, self-dramatisation, snobbery, nostalgia, and so forth: but all such dismissals are too simple...[1]

Clearly the poem is only quoted as another instance of the sort of ideas which may be connected with towers as

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[1] The Lonely Tower, 1965, pp.12-13.

symbols, relating the tower to Ireland and to symbolic traditions; and it is the qualities of character which made Yeats buy the tower and use it in his verse that Henn is primarily defending.

In his introduction to the first edition of his book, Henn makes clear that he believes the poetry to be dependent upon knowledge and understanding of the poet's character, life and thought:

> This poetry does demand, perhaps more than most, a personal response, with all the dangers and exaltations that a strictly impersonal criticism might wish to avoid.
>
> ...even the simplest poems may demand cross-reference to a passage in an essay or a play, or a parallel usage in another poem, before its full significance becomes apparent.[1]

Because he assumes that the poetry is private (by "a personal response" he evidently means a response to the poet's person rather than a full response of the reader as a person to the poem as symbol) and that it requires external support, Henn is lead to the logical conclusion that everything is relevant to the poem, and that there is no boundary to the reference material which must be searched to explain, finally, both the man and his works: "All that he saw and read and thought must one day be examined ..."[2]. By assuming the poems to be incomplete and incomprehensible, Henn allows their difficulties to remain; they are simply passed on to the poet's life where

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1 The Lonely Tower, 1965, pp.xiv, x.

2 Ibid., p.xiii, and see above, Introduction, pp.x-xi.

they are much more difficult to solve, being no longer in a limited context of ordered significance. Hence the problems tend to become as unlimited and out of control as a man's whole life can make them appear.

In the introduction to his second edition Henn reveals the same attitudes, although his immediate concern is rather to defend his own critical assumptions than the poet. Henn withdraws at one point to the extent of saying: "I do not think that more than a dozen of the poems demand or admit, because of their complexity, widely different interpretations".[1] But on the next page he adds: "But I believe it is misleading to regard every poem as a self-sufficient whole needing no ancillary comment..."[2] because if we do not understand fully the esoteric basis of Yeats's thought, Henn argues, we would miss some magnificent poetic metaphors and also "meaning in depth".

In other words, despite his disclaimer, Henn still believes that Yeats's work is essentially private and incomplete: "...for Yeats, as for Shakespeare, it is necessary to consider the work as parts of a whole which approaches an epic totality. With that in mind, the experience of the individual work emerges in its completeness, and then, (and only then) it affords the opportunity to assess its total impact".[3] Henn's attitude towards symbolism explains his assumptions. Consider the passage quoted in my introduction:

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1 Henn, p.xix.

2 Ibid., p.xx.

3 Ibid., p.xxi.

> We must realize that the "reality" expressed by the symbol is, in terms of an algebraic analysis, infinitely complex; and though the variation of meaning is decreased by the selective impact of one symbol upon another, the total effect must always be that of a richly cumulative but indeterminate complexity.[1]

It is evident that Henn believes that symbols are expressive of meaning rather than constitutive and that symbols in literature are extractable from their contexts, being inter-relatable because of their reference meaning. For this reason Henn's treatment of the poems is commonly fragmentary, symbols and images from different poems being juxtaposed with one another, as well as with quotations and references from Yeats's prose and other sources.

In his chapter on "Image and Symbol" Henn suggests that a poet "can establish his symbolism, and suggest its values, by one of three methods": by relating them to a historical or mythological tradition; by the use of archetypal symbols; or through the creation of a personal mythology, (once again pointing to the fact that Henn believes that it is external reference that determines the symbol's meaning). As he proposes to approach Yeats's use of the symbol through a consideration of the "dominants", examining their implications "to suggest how they develop and fuse with the minor symbols", such a classification might have proved useful if the pre-suppositions behind it were sound. That is, if this was the major way in which a poet established his symbolism and suggested its values, it should be possible to see the "dominant" symbols in one

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[1] Henn, p.xiv, p.xi above.

or other of these categories. In fact, though, Henn does not appear to be able to give the symbols any consistent or convincing alignment within this scheme: the tower, the sword, are part traditional, part archetypal, part personal; the swan, the heron, are part traditional, part dependent "on the recognition of their cumulative significance in a number of poems". This atomistic approach not only does little to elucidate the symbols, it also often leaves both symbol and poem in a state of confusion.

As an example, consider Henn's discussion of the linking of the tower and sword symbols in the poem "A Dialogue of Self and Soul". Although he says that "Those symbols are expanded in the "Dialogue" into a system carefully balanced with an almost intellectual precision to establish the inter-relations of meaning",[1] Henn does not proceed to examine this balancing in the poem as might be expected, but takes the tower and the sword as separate symbols and refers them to the poem and to any other associations which he finds relevant. Noting, for instance, that the primary symbolic meaning of the sword is obvious, he goes on:

> But it was particularly appropriate in other ways. Symons writes of "Students of magic, who have the sharp and swift swords of the soldier". The scabbard-connections are emphasised by the royal attributes of the silk and gold upon it and we remember, perhaps, Byron's lyric. The sword is consecrated,...for the Japanese warrior is holy like the magician and the hermit. Its blade is like a looking-glass, the mirror of

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1 Henn, p.134.

> objective man: it is "unspotted by the centuries". It is also, perhaps, a symbol of the will. "We possess nothing but the will and we must never let the children of vague desires breathe upon it nor the waters of sentiment rust the terrible mirror of its blade".[1]

Of these points, the only one which is thoroughly relevant to the poem is the consecrated nature of the sword, which suggests that human struggle and conflict may also have a religious value for man. Royalty, in particular, is not an exact description of the scabbard's binding, and it is not the scabbard, but the silk which is being emphasised:

> That flowering, silken old embroidery, torn
> From some court-lady's dress and round
> The wooden scabbard bound and wound,
> Can, tattered, still protect, faded adorn.
>
> .....
>
> About it lie
> Flowers from I know not what embroidery -
> Heart's purple - ...[2]

The gold that Henn mentions comes from another poem, "Symbols" ("Gold-sewn silk on the sword-blade, Beauty and fool together laid".); in this poem it is the elements of high culture and femininity which are stressed. As Henn himself notes, "The embroidery is 'flowering', with a double value in the word, for the significance of past love is continued in the present".[3] The silk is "torn

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1 Henn, pp.134-5, Symons, p.54, Wade, Letters of W.B. Yeats, 1954, pp.434-5.

2 C.P., pp.265-6.

3 Henn, p.135.

from some court-lady's dress", accentuating the most exciting and violent aspects of life: love and war, both exalted by the richness of suggestion about the fullness of possibility of life in an aristocratic society where culture, freedom and intensity of emotion, physical vigour and beauty are the cardinal values.

Byron's "For the sword outwears its sheath, And the soul wears out the breast" is the most confusing of Henn's allusions here, giving an almost opposite meaning to Yeats's. It is a clear example of the kind of wildly inappropriate importation of external ideas which can occur when the symbol is extracted from its context and treated as self-contained idea. And Henn's other suggestions in the passage quoted are equally unhelpful with respect to the understanding of Yeats's use of the sword-image in the poem. If the sword was appropriate because Symons had associated it with students of magic, it was so only with respect to Yeats himself. There is nothing in the poem to indicate that Yeats was a student of magic; the dialogue is expressed in much more generally understood terms (see discussion, pp.140-1). Similarly, Yeats's comment on the sword as a symbol of will, although bearing some relation to the statement of the poem, provides only a very weak and generalised approximation to a part of it. The declaration of self-assertion and of a willed self-forgiveness certainly emerges from the poem, but it is opposed to a willed transcendence, not to "vague desires". If it is only in heaven that we can lose the opposition between will and desire, according to the poem, yet it requires great concentration, a willed loss of self, to reach that state. More important, if the sword is a "symbol of the will" in

the poem, only the poem can show it to be so, and Henn's uncertainty about the point reflects this. The association of mirror and blade with "will" in one place carries no guarantee that mirror and blade necessarily have the same association in another. ("Mirror" in part two of the poem obviously has quite other connotations, as does "sword-blade" in the line from "Symbols" quoted above).

The tower is treated no less capriciously, its meaning in the poem being subjugated to external references. "The tower, like the sword-blade", says Henn, "is 'unspotted by the centuries'", and to prove this quotes from "Blood and the Moon":[1]

> Seven centuries have passed and it is pure,
> The blood of innocence has left no stain.

Yet in "Dialogue" the "broken, crumbling battlement" is set with deliberate paradox against "Sato's ancient blade, still as it was, Still razor-keen, still like a looking-glass Unspotted by the centuries". Nevertheless, Henn does have a valid point. He continues, "At the outset, then, the two opposing symbols have an intimate connection in purity, independence of human repentance that "keeps the heart impure",[2] which is true, although it is not apparent at the outset, only in the second part and through the paradoxical contrast of such images as the mirror and the fountain/ditch/blindness associations. The purity of the tower in "Blood and the Moon" is not

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1 C.P., p.269.

2 Henn, p.135.

intrinsic to the tower but depends on the light of the moon shining on its floor. Similarly the tower in "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" only has value as a path of the imagination away from the impurities of earth, but it is misleading to argue that it is therefore also "unspotted by the centuries". To derive one's understanding of the tower in this poem from what is said about it in "Blood and the Moon" would be to invite chaos because it would then stand as another emblem of war and mundane power instead of contrasting with the sword. And this is precisely what Henn does, adducing so many associations for this "symbol" that it cannot be wondered at that he should consider symbolism ineffable:

> The tower is the emblem of the night of war, of violence, of man's aspirations to philosophy, of the decay of civilisation, of ancient ceremony, disintegrating in the face of the world - "the broken crumbling battlements".[1]

This example is quite typical of Henn's treatment of the poetry throughout the book. Because he looks away from the poems, taking the symbols as separable entities and the meaning as a direct projection of the artist's being, meanings are constrained and made doubtful, and obscurity is created where none need exist, the critic's own insights into the poems suffering along with the rest. Henn's most characteristic response to the uncertainty induced by his misconception of the nature of symbol is to attempt to establish categories or underlying symmetries in Yeats's usages and development. Like Melchiori, he

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1 Henn, p.134.

turns to relationships between Yeats's imagery and that of other works of art because

> ...we are helped to perceive the unifying principles of Yeats' use of symbols. Their apparent arbitrariness and confusion vanishes, and they can be seen as clearly related to his six great periods of human myth and history and thought;...[1]

It is perhaps unnecessary to add that these relationships are no more satisfactorily established than are those purporting to relate the "kinds" of symbol. Nor is the "apparent arbitrariness and confusion" of the symbols reduced, as it could not be by even the most precise knowledge of sources if the poem does not fully establish its symbolism. It is no help to know that the imagery of the third stanza of "News for the Delphic Oracle" corresponds in many details with a Poussin painting once entitled "The Marriage of Peleus and Thetis" (since re-catalogued as "Acis and Galatea"), or that the tree half flame and half green leaf probably came from the Mabinogion. If it were necessary to know such references the artist should have alluded to them in such a way that the reader would be able to find them without recondite researches, and if he did not, the poems ~~are~~ would be to that extent arbitrary and unable to function naturally as literary symbols.

Henn attempts to subdue his uncertainty about Yeats's symbolism by finding relationships to external sources and patterns within the poet's thought. F.A.C. Wilson is equally uncertain and even more directly and overtly

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[1] Henn, p.264.

intentionalist in his approach. Wilson claims to be "using the technique which will show us what Yeats meant by his poems at the time he wrote them". His interest is in "what the symbols meant for the poet himself", and his method is to use key poems and plays to illustrate Yeats's "symbology".[1] This brings him closer to individual poems than Henn, but, as Wilson himself realises, "A study of intentional meaning tends,..., to become a study of the intellectual sub-structure",[2] and he is consequently committed to investigations into Yeats's esoteric interests. Moreover, as a result of the necessary uncertainty of the intentionalist approach, and because he feels that Yeats's basic religious ideas (instead of his symbolic usage, as Henn) require defense against charges of privacy and eccentricity,[3] Wilson can hardly make any comment on the text without feeling it necessary to reinforce or justify his statement by reference to some external authority, usually in Yeats's prose, but also in the fields of philosophy, history and religion behind the poet's thought. "In case this reading is thought conjectural, I had better confirm it by cross-reference to Yeats's prose,..."; "On the Boiler contains a strong attack on modern egalitarian India, and this bears me out in enforcing on the final couplet above the interpretation I have done:..."; "Vivienne Koch's analysis of this verse [stanza three of "The Statues"] becomes a shambles because

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1 Yeats's Iconography, 1960, pp.13-14.

2 Ibid., p.17.

3 See above, Introduction, p.x, Wilson, p.17.

she does not understand (though Yeats explains it in a letter to Edith Shackleton Heald) that these lines describe the importation of Greek statuary into India by Alexander's armies...."[1]

These imported materials repeatedly beguile Wilson away from the work he is supposedly discussing, and induce him to apply to the work erroneous and confusing ideas. The poem referred to in the quotations given above, "The Statues", is an excellent example. (It is also one of the poems discussed in this thesis in chapter three, pp.199-208). The second comment quoted above, for instance, refers to the lines:

> When gong and conch declare the hour to bless
> Grimalkin crawls to Buddha's emptiness.

Part of Wilson's gloss of these lines is:

> ...the modern Indian worshipper, who has been caught up in the materialist 'tide' and has become almost wholly objective, so that his true gods are the witch's cat and the dragon-monster of Eastern art, even today at the hour of prayer is ironically compelled to pay homage to subjective religion.[2]

This is obviously fallacious with respect to the poem. Why is the worshipper himself referred to in the poem as Grimalkin if we are to think of this as his god, and what exactly is the dragon-monster? It is not satisfactory to explain the first point away as some kind of metonymy without a close examination of the rest of the stanza,

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1 Wilson, pp.300, 301, 299.

2 Ibid., p.301.

when the other cat association, as well as other elements of the structure, discount this possibility (see my discussion, p.204). The dragon-monster evidently comes from Wilson's investigations of Eastern religion and not from the poem. He further glosses this line:

> If we are connoisseurs in Eastern art we shall connect with his last line those illustrations where the material world is symbolised by dragonish monsters and misshapen beasts, who prostrate themselves before an empty space symbolic of the Buddha's holiness, itself too sacred for pictorial delineation.[1]

Wilson himself calls his reading of these lines "enforced", and it is clearly Wilson's reading of On the Boiler and his knowledge of Eastern religion that are responsible for this enforcing. The last passage quoted shows plainly Wilson's initial assumption that Yeats was writing for an audience of initiates, for even if Yeats himself was such a connoisseur as Wilson suggests, it would be necessary to suppose that he expected his readers to be so also only if the lines made no sense without reference to such knowledge.

It will be useful to compare Wilson's treatment of this poem with that of Vivienne Koch, whom Wilson acknowledges as the source of some of his ideas. This poem, she says, has not been discussed by other critics because

> ...it presents a uniform front of obscurity which must prove irritating even to admirers of Yeats. But, happily, it is one poem,

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[1] Wilson, p.299.

> increasingly few among the Last Poems, which the relative clarity of Yeats's prose in A Vision and elsewhere helps to illumine.[1]

This comment is interesting in view of Miss Koch's declaration in her introduction that she intends, first, to approach the poems with "a willingness to let that particular poem take hold of the imagination as if it were - at the moment of scrutiny - the only poem in the world"; second, "to let only that particular poem and no other source - whether in poetry or in prose - determine, in so far as is possible, what its meaning is". And she adds "This means a trust in the poem, which, if we cannot give it, should make us suspect it as poetry".[2] From this beginning it would not seem likely that there would be much similarity between her approach and Wilson's, but the purpose of her italicised passage is evident when we consider the above comment on "The Statues".

Despite her statement about trust in the poem, Miss Koch does not appear to "suspect this poem as poetry" as her treatment of it would suggest. Admitting that the real test of the poem's alleged obscurity would be to see how far the poem could be understood without prose props, Miss Koch yet makes no attempt to apply it, explaining that she cannot assume a fictive innocence of the knowledge of the rest of Yeats's work, no matter how desirable it may be for independent responses. In other words, she allows her reading of the prose to influence her reading of the poem, implying that she finds the poem

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1 W.B. Yeats. The Tragic Phase, 1951, p.59.

2 Ibid., p.8. (Author's italics).

obscure. It may be true that she could not entirely ignore her knowledge of the prose, but it is possible to re-apply such knowledge to the poem, allowing the poem to produce its own meaning by suggestion and limitation in the same way as it must at the verbal level. In the result, Wilson says of her reading of the poem, "one reads ["The Statues"] by the light of Vivienne Koch, whose reconstruction of the sources is perhaps her best piece of Yeats scholarship".[1]

There are various passages in Yeats's prose which bear a resemblance, sometimes quite close, to passages from this poem, and these are quoted again and again by various critics.[2] But these passages, like all the other external material, almost always do more to confuse than to clarify the poem's meaning, and for the same reasons: where they confirm a dubious reading they may be helpful although they then reflect on the poem's integrity, but more often they are simply substituted for the poem which is then stretched and twisted to include all their meaning. Thus, Wilson agrees with Miss Koch that a memory of Maud Gonne "gave rise to" this poem. The main source for this statement is a passage from the Autobiographies:

> ...her face, like the face of some Greek statue, showed little thought, her whole body seemed a master-work of long labouring thought, as though a Scopas had measured and calculated, consorted with Egyptian sages, and mathematicians out of Babylon, that he might out-face even Artemisia's sepulchral image with a living norm.

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1 Wilson, p.290.

2 E.g. Ellmann, Koch, MacNeice, Mulryne, Saul, Seiden, Ure, etc. - almost every critic who discusses the poem, in fact.

> But in that ancient civilisation abstract thought scarce existed, while she rose but partially and for a moment out of raging abstraction;...[1]

Wilson comments on this passage:

> Here, as well as the statue-symbolism, we have the suggestion of those "sepulchral" or as he says in "A Bronze Head" "supernatural" values which Yeats saw in Maud Gonne's beauty, together with an imagery of mensuration and computation that recur in "The Statues"; and also (as if to point the relevance of the passage) in [The Only Jealousy of Emer.][2]

Since Wilson does not say exactly what the recurrence of these ideas is relevant to it must be assumed that he is referring to the poet's habits of thought. Thus, Wilson asserts that although "all eventually depends" on Yeats's theory of sculpture in interpreting this poem, "we ought not to overlook the personal element in his assertion that the subjective artists penetrated to the Idea of beauty itself".[3] It was through Maud Gonne, Wilson says, that Yeats himself penetrated to the Idea of beauty.

At the least, this is an over-simplification, but that is less important than the fact that the poem is made to appear private (the very point against which Wilson is supposed to be defending Yeats) in a manner which is quite unnecessary. The reasons for linking Maud Gonne with the poem are the associations with Greek statuary, the idea that measuring and calculation can produce a certain type

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1 W.B. Yeats, Autobiographies, 1955, pp.364-5.

2 Wilson, p.122.

3 Ibid., p.295.

of beauty, and the relation of this idea to an ideal of non-abstract thought. These factors are present in the poem, but there is no mention, or even hint of Maud Gonne there: nor is it necessary to an understanding of the poem that she should be taken into consideration.[1] Yeats shows in the poem how an ideal human form, the result of an understanding of the universe which is both formal and organic, can become the focus of human aspirations. It may be further questioned whether Maud Gonne is in fact relevant to the sources of the poem, should these be required. Despite Wilson's statement, it is doubtful whether she is primary to the ideas of Pythagorean wholeness of vision and the cyclical theory of life and history which underlie the poem.

Another important "source" is found by Wilson and Miss Koch in the Autobiographies, in a passage in which Yeats describes statues of Mausolus and Artemisia in the British Museum as

> ...private, half-animal, half-divine figures, all unlike the Grecian athletes and Egyptian kings in their near neighbourhood...images of an unpremeditated joyous energy, that neither I nor any other man, racked by doubt and inquiry, can achieve...a half-anonymous artistry.[2]

"This passage", Miss Koch says, "must be put against the whole of "The Statues" which, complex though it is, nevertheless finds its centre in the antithesis Yeats makes between thoughtlessness and abstraction".[3]

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1 See discussion below, p.209.

2 P.150.

3 Koch, p.62.

At first sight this appears to be a useful and sensible comment on the poem, but in fact it is not quite accurate: the terms of this opposition require qualification. In the first two stanzas the ideal forms of the statues are said to lack character, but they are not "thoughtless", in so far as they are the result of both thought and effort. The same must be said of the Buddha's apparent emptiness. And finally, in the fourth stanza, the antithesis proposed is once again between abstraction and the combination of thought and instinct which the Irish are to achieve by returning to the springs of wholeness of vision which began with Pythagoras. Throughout the poem the effort of attaining such an ideal state is stressed, and the concept of unity of being that Wilson dissects out from Yeats's prose emerges quite clearly from the poem, being based there firmly on calculation and measurement, and on the quality of form, rather than being associated with "an unpremeditated joyous energy".

Once again, the passage is similar to the poem in some ways, but there is no reason why it "must be put against the whole of "The Statues". Miss Koch allows it to over-ride the poem to the extent that she does not recognise the function of calculation and measurement in achieving the "anonymity" of the statues. "It is typical", she says, "of the tortuous processes of Yeats's thinking that he should write a poem in dispraise of intellect or "abstractions" and, in the end, arrive at an endorsement of that which he had thought to despise".[1]

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1 Koch, pp.73-4.

With such an odd opinion of Yeats's thinking, it is hardly surprising that Miss Koch should assume a private basis for this poem. She goes on: "These oddly oscillating loyalties wrote such a mercurial line in his work, that, by the time of the difficult late poems, we cannot safely assign any single belief even to a single poem".

It is noticeable that Wilson is able to improve on Miss Koch's interpretation by relating her external references to the poem. Thus, where she sees a reminiscence of Blake's "Visions of the Daughters of Albion" in the lines:

> But boys and girls, pale from the imagined love
> Of solitary beds, knew what they were,
> That passion could bring character enough,
> And pressed at midnight in some public place
> Live lips upon a plummet-measured face.

and quotes these lines for comparison:

> The moment of desire! The moment of desire! The
> Virgin
> That pines for man shall awaken her womb to enormous
> joys
> In the secret shadows of her chamber: the youth shut
> up from
> The lustful joy shall forget to generate and create
> an enormous image
> In the shadows of his curtains and in the folds of
> his silent pillow.

Wilson notes that this quotation is matter for contrast as well as comparison since Blake is deploring the shutting away of young desire from contact with others and the consequent turning inward to "enormous joys". Wilson adds the succeeding lines to the Blake quotation:

> Are not these the places of religion, the rewards of
> continence
> The self-enjoyings of self-denial?

with the comment that Yeats's adolescents are less fallen than these; "imagined love" has led them beyond the sexual into the archetypal world and they are therefore able to understand the true religious significance of Pythagoras' statues".[1]

But Wilson adds many interpolations of his own, such as that already quoted on the Indian worshipper of Buddha, which threaten to drown out the poem. Before he approaches the text of the poem Wilson defends it against D.S. Savage's attack[2] on Yeats's "inhumanity" by arguing that in the last stanza Yeats is not merely being narrowly partisan, but is "judging transcendentally"; using as evidence another poem, "A Bronze Head", and, more reasonably but without supporting argument, the statement that the "ultimate intention" of the poem is to "set up against objective "multiplicity" a great image of "the One".[3] There follows a further digression (Wilson's own words) into Yeats's theory of sculpture, in which Wilson discusses Unity of Being in terms of alchemical discipline and then develops "Yeats' idea of the tradition of the subjective artist" in sculpture, comparing it with the theories of Spengler. After this comes the digression into the "personal element" in Yeats's theory of the ideal: Maud Gonne, including some discussion of classical statuary as "philosophy in action".

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1 Wilson, p.297.

2 In The Permanence of Yeats, ed. J. Hall and M. Steinmann, 1950, pp.173-194.

3 Wilson, p.292.

Many of the points with which Wilson deals in this protracted introduction to the poem are fundamental to its meaning, but without exception they could have been more profitably discussed with reference to the text rather than to a miscellany of Yeats's other writings. Much of Wilson's effort is spent in establishing the validity of Yeats's materials, and he is clearly more at home in this sort of comment than in his actual criticism of the poem, where his nervous habit of grasping at any reference-meaning which seems to be relevant frustrates his natural percipience and common sense.

Although my illustrations have been confined to this one poem, I do not think this falsifies Wilson's work essentially. The statements in his introduction point directly to the kind of approach evident here, and his method does not vary radically throughout his two books. Further examples would merely echo what is seen in his extended treatment of this poem. Miss Koch is in a different category inasmuch as her theory is unexceptionable, but is not borne out consistently in her practice, although she does contribute some valuable insights when theory and practice coalesce.

So many critics have assumed the necessity of Yeats's prose for the interpretation of the poetry that it has even been justified as being "the usual critical practice".[1] Even Richard Ellman, in the appendix to his valuable book on Yeats's poetic development, states that in order to clarify obscurities and throw light on methods of composition his discussions of individual poems include

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1 Edward Engelberg, The Vast Design, 1964, p.190.

not only analysis and paraphrase but also "make use of collateral material, published and unpublished, when this is of help".[1] The list of critics who, tacitly or deliberately, assume the necessity of relating the poetry to something non-metaphorical includes Virginia Moore, Jeffares, Macneice, Engelberg, Saul, Unterecker, Schwartz. ~~The list is long, and need not stop here~~. Jeffares[2] gives biographical explanations of how the poems came to be written and factual explanations of details within the poetry. Virginia Moore[3] extrapolates the poetry back into traditional doctrinal systems, attempting to force Yeats into an acceptable Christian, or at least not anti-Christian, mould. Saul[4] and Unterecker[5] quote external material widely in their readings of individual poems. Delmore Schwartz[6] questions the limits of "legitimate interpretation" and follows Blackmur's suggestion for a system of interpretation of Yeats's poems like the four-level interpretation of Dante, in order to allow for the possibility of "fruitful misinterpretation" and to incorporate Yeats's esoteric thought and his romanticism. In this way the greatness of the writing may be elucidated

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1 The Identity of Yeats, 1954, p.251.

2 A. Norman Jeffares, W.B. Yeats. Man and Poet, 1949.

3 The Unicorn, 1954.

4 George Brandon Saul, Prolegomena to the Study of Yeats's Poems, 1957.

5 John Unterecker, A Reader's Guide to William Butler Yeats, 1959.

6 "An Unwritten Book", Southern Review VII (1941), pp.426-441. Also in P.Y., pp.277-295.

"without forgetting the inferior quality of the emotions and attitudes embodied in the writing".[1]

Despite an earnest attempt to arrive at a view of poetry which could accommodate Yeats's antagonism to the scientific modern world, MacNeice's book is a tissue of contradictions. Yeats's poetry, MacNiece says, is less esoteric than it is often represented to be, yet A Vision is the "book of reference" for the later poetry. Yeats used his private symbolism comparatively little, yet his symbols are "mostly sanctioned by literature or by his own peculiar philosophy". Yeats as a poet is characterised by integrity, but he is not wholly sincere: he pretends to mysticism, talks nonsense, poses, suppresses, exaggerates and misrepresents. That Yeats was no mystic was not necessarily a liability, yet "Yeats's would-be mystical reactions to external objects cannot be compared, even as ingredients for poetry with the more genuine mystical reactions of others". "Pseudo-passions", MacNeice says, are not "just as good - even in poetry - as real passions". Yeats disguised his lack of true mystical experience by attempting a rigid symbolic algebra. This did not succeed: the symbols are always fusing and changing, but such imprecision need not be disadvantageous since a poem may be more effective because it was not perfectly understood by the poet. Nevertheless, the acceptance of the notion of the unconscious by poets causes them to cease censoring images whose significance they cannot define, leading to the introduction of private symbols into poetry and hence to obscurity, as in some of Yeats's later poetry.[2]

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[1] Schwartz, p.485, P.Y., p.290.

[2] Louis MacNeice, The Poetry of W.B. Yeats, 1941, pp.19, 175, 138, 230, 229, 12, 230, 183, 139, 138, 137.

MacNeice maintains that a poem is valuable in two interconnected ways: in its self-coherence and in its correspondence to life. Poetry in itself can only be experienced, not analysed, he argues, and values within poetry do not need external validity. The latter stands liable to controvert the second factor, "correspondence to life", but MacNeice does not reconcile the two and, despite his statement that the relationship of poetry to life cannot be defined, he assumes and uses such a relationship as the major criterion for both poet and poetry. He aims, he says, only to give the background for the poetry. This cannot account for the poetry, he adds, since the background gives merely the "conditions" and not the "cause" of the poetry. Evidently MacNeice would like to be able to find this complete external explanation or reference for a poem. In consequence, his attitude towards the poetry is entirely equivocal. His judgment of the poetry's self-coherence is hindered, if not prohibited, by his assumption of the poet's irresponsibility and philosophical poverty. "The thought taken from its context is esoteric and, indeed, unsound, but that does not matter for it is perfectly fused into the poetry",[1] MacNeice says, but in fact, because he mistrusts the external validity of Yeats's values, he is unable to accept their internal validity and finds the poet insincere. Both beliefs and emotions in poetry he considers to be better if, somehow, we know they are real, if, that is to say, we have some external corroboration or conviction of their legitimacy. MacNeice argues at length for an internal criterion for poetry which he is unable to apply

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1 MacNeice, p.135.

in practice because he removes the possibility of examining the poetry itself by assuming it to be totally inexplicable, and looks instead for external certitude.

Edward Engelberg begins an article on the acceptance and understanding of Yeats by the present generation of students with an attack on the New Criticism, which he claims is finally invalidated because the close examination of dark and light image clusters, archetypal birth and death patterns, puns and ironic ambiguities of structure and language in the end leaves the poetry unexplained and meaningless. This view of New Criticism as emptying literature of all but its own catchwords, ignoring the meanings of the poem's words, has the familiar result of persuading the critic that extra-literary concerns must be re-introduced into criticism. Yeats in particular is less susceptible than other modern poets to a purely intrinsic approach, Engelberg says, and asks

> who can teach Yeats for very long without at least mentioning that: Yeats was an Irishman, was the son of a painter, lived and wrote well into early fame in the nineteenth, not the twentieth century, loved a lady called Maud Gonne, with whom he disagreed on political issues, these political issues having to do with Ireland's struggle for independence, was a senator when he wrote 'Among School Children', admired Byzantine culture, lived in a tower, believed in a pattern of cyclical history, valued the ethos of Renaissance vertu, power and sweetness, was an unorthodox Christian, and used the words 'moon' and 'gyre' in ways that had much to do with his conception of life and history.[1]

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1 "The New Generation and the Acceptance of Yeats", D.E.S. Maxwell and S.B. Bushrui, eds., W.B. Yeats. Centenary Essays, 1965, pp.90-91.

Although it is true that many of these things would probably be mentioned eventually, to mention them without reference to the poems from which they mostly become obvious would be wasted effort. Consider the list: Yeats's Irishness is surely obvious; his family background emerges from the poems to some extent, and very little additional information is strictly necessary for understanding the poetry; Yeats's part in the development of literature from the nineteenth to the twentieth century is certainly of interest, but it also requires to be based on evidence best gained by close examination of the poetry; Maud Gonne's name is totally unnecessary to an understanding of the poems; that Yeats disagreed with a woman he loved on a question of Irish (and general) politics becomes obvious from the poems; there is no need to know more about the "smiling public man" than the poem tells us; that the poet lived in a tower, or said he did, is perfectly obvious; so also is his belief in or poetical use of cyclical patterns in history; and his admiration of some Renaissance qualities; his "unorthodox Christianity" is dubious; his use of certain words is important where they occur in the poetry, and the ways in which he uses them emerges most relevantly from the poetry. If the class want to know whether Yeats had anyone special in mind in "No Second Troy" is it ascribable to anything more appropriate to a course in literature than mere human curiosity? The personal interest is not the critical, says W.K. Wimsatt,[1] and although it is no doubt natural and proper when developed for its own sake, it can be

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1 The Verbal Icon, p.265.

applied to the work of literature only in the most general way since it concentrates only on the subject and not on the achieved symbol of the work, and there is no certain relationship between them.

Another critic of the New Critics is G.S. Fraser, who agrees with John Bayley[1] that the works of the romantic poets do not lend themselves to techniques of close criticism because we respond to them before we analyse them. The trouble with the New Criticism, Fraser says, is that many critics tend to substitute a rigid method of analysis for what was originally intended only as an approach. The validity of the approach is restricted to testing the conclusions previously arrived at in the first reading of a poem, which must be made without having analysis in mind. Against this it may be argued that the primary literary judgment of a trained and receptive mind would surely tend to take account of more and subtler details in a poem than would the untrained, and in fact Fraser's own readings in this essay pay more attention to the words of the poems than do those of the "New Critics" he is chastising.

Fraser applies his strictures to two essays, one by Walter Houghton which is concerned with the Crazy Jane poems and includes among them "I am of Ireland", and the essay by Delmore Schwartz mentioned earlier which includes a discussion of part of "Among School Children".[2] These

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1 G.S. Fraser, Vision and Rhetoric, 1959; John Bayley, The Romantic Survival, 1960.

2 "Yeats and Crazy Jane: The Hero in Old Age", P.Y., pp.327-348; "An Unwritten Book", P.Y., pp.277-295.

critics arrive at highly aberrant readings of the poems as a result of applying the "strict isolating methods of mathematical, logical, or grammatical analysis" of New Criticism, Fraser argues. Houghton, for instance, states that "I am of Ireland" is set in a pub somewhere outside of Ireland where there is a drunken orchestra, and centres on a theme of simple tragic contrast between the holy and unholy dances of charity and lust. The woman is Crazy Jane, the man Jack the Journeyman. Strangely, this man is both "stately", for which Houghton selects from the dictionary meanings: "showing a sense of superiority, repellantly dignified, not affable or approachable", and also coarse and vulgar: he "gives her the wink, and agrees that there's no time to lose: they better get going".[1] Fraser points out that this misrepresents both the situation and the poem. The woman is not like Crazy Jane, "stately" need not imply anything repellant, and the man is more dignified and less vulgar than Houghton suggests. But such misreading can hardly be attributed to close attention to the poem, mechanical or otherwise. Houghton in fact only deals with half the poem in any detail, and that receives a very perfunctory reading.

Maintaining that "Yeats's poems, impressive individually, are even more impressive as a coherent and continuous body of work: and the subject matter of many of them comes directly, of many more indirectly, from his own biography",[2] Fraser stays closer to the poem in producing his own reading, but also introduces details from Yeats's biography and fragments from his other poems to illustrate

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1 P.Y., p.340.

2 Fraser, p.73.

the poet's feelings about modern Ireland. On this basis he argues that the poem is about the ironic interrelations of the realistic and romantic attitudes, in particular with respect to legendary Ireland and its modern counterpart.

The latter idea arises from Fraser's introduction of biographical material to create a suggested setting for the poem - although he has partially admitted earlier that this is unnecessary - resulting in Fraser's taking the protagonist of the poem to be Yeats in person, who had been in exile from Ireland and who loved its legendary past and not its actual present. But this narrows the poem's range and reduces its status unduly. It seems unlikely that Yeats would have been guilty of such a lapse in taste as to give a man we are to think of as himself such distinction amongst the crowd:

> One man, one man alone
> In that outlandish gear,
> One solitary man
> Of all that rambled there
> Had turned his stately head.

The man may perhaps be a poet in the outlandish present responding, albeit reluctantly and sardonically, to the call to the Holy Land of Ireland, with its suggestions of some romantic and mystical destiny or place associated with art, but that is a very different thing from being the poet as himself.

Similarly, in dealing with Delmore Schwartz's interpretation of the sixth stanza of "Among School Children", in which he suggests that Aristotle may be seen as playing with his theory of the universe (the celestial spheres "against the bottom of the Prime Mover") absorbed

in his own life in contempt for nature, although Fraser condemns Schwartz for being excessively analytical, he appeals for evidence against Schwartz to Yeats's precision of language, and to the fact that "Yeats's imagery is sometimes fantastic, but never merely grotesque". Once again, Fraser himself applies the principle of close attention to the poem, explaining that, although he dislikes paraphrase in general, it is necessary in correcting others and useful also for testing the "feeling that one understands" in "young and untrained readers". "There is a lazy and self-conceited way of closely examining a text as well as a lazy and self-conceited way of making a summary judgment on it",[1] Fraser says, and this may also, I believe, be taken as a just comment on his own criticism of close textual examination. So intelligent a critic as Fraser may be justified to some extent in relying on subjective judgments, particularly if he is aware of the necessity of sensitive attention to the text. Even so, Fraser's own interpretation of the stanza is deflected somewhat by his initial judgment that Yeats is talking only about the philosphers' ageing selves rather than about their ideas and consequent attitudes towards life also. Ultimately, however, it is his refusal to grant the poetry that degree of self-determination which it must have in order to be seen as itself and not as a mere postscript to the poet's interests or philosophies or biography, and not simply his reliance on his own judgment, which leads Fraser, as with all the other critics discussed above, away from the poems and towards a justification of the poetry as part of a larger work, by implication an extension of the poet's life.

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[1] Fraser, p.82.

## III. The Poet as Mythmaker

Peter Ure is another critic who, like T.R. Henn and F.A.C. Wilson, is unable to arrive at a stable position between defending the poet against charges of privacy and assuming privacy in his own treatment of the poet. As before, the result is that his practice follows his theory in being inconsistent and self-contradictory, making it appear that his conception of the function of criticism is the re-distribution of poetry among its psychological, historical and other elements, or the discovery of sources. Yet in his book, Towards A Mythology, Ure shows considerable insight into the nature of myth and symbol, only stopping short of a consistent and inter-related understanding of his own propositions. Ure's interest is centred on one particular aspect of poetry and mythology, the presentation of personality, and this helps him to achieve an intensive view of one area of Yeats's poetry, even though his vision is less well focussed over the rest.

Because mythology is a creation of the racial imagination, Ure says, the mythological figure serves as both individual and type. Myth is "that in which the passion of the individual and the abstraction of the idea cohere ~~with~~ without loss to either",[1] but this definition must be extended to cover material which has indeed a similar poetic stimulus, but springs from the experience of the individual not the race. Two different conceptions of mythology are in evidence here. Ure has already proposed an "extended" usage of the word mythology to include both object and process, and he is here clearly attempting a

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1 Towards A Mythology, 1946, p.32.

definition of it as process, although he has not fully accepted it as such. He still regards mythology as a body of stories, mysteriously created by the "racial imagination". This is a concept comparable to the nineteenth century German scholarly pre-occupation with "folk" literature. The race is surely only a series of individuals, if with the common consensus behind them, each improving on the work of his predecessors, as with oral poetry. It seems unlikely that the mythological figure would be anything but an abstraction without the individual act of imagination. If Ure had conceived of myth-making completely in the terms of his definition, as process, this extension of the definition to the individual poet would have been unnecessary.

The effect of Ure's incomplete acceptance of the concept of process does not stop there. He justifies his extension of the definition by considering Yeats's habit of universalising his friends' personalities. Yeats's poetry, he says, is essentially about people, including himself; and

> his system of philosophy as set forth in A Vision is to a great degree designed to explain and test character; his Autobiographies and many of his prose writings (the title Dramatis Personae is itself significant) are personal, anecdotal, much occupied with the lives and thoughts of the men and women he has known.[1]

In "The Tragic Generation", for instance, Ure says, Yeats creates a structure of myth to explain personalities and historical types, and he came to treat history as a matter of personality. Thus the poetry of the period which

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1 Ure, p.25.

culminates in "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory" succeeds because the characters retain their unique individuality and yet become "the personal manifestation of the abstract idea". In the poems from "Easter 1916" on, however, Ure finds a "weakening in the sense of personality", "...the individual cannot become a 'hero' or absolute symbol because his unique humanity must also appear" Ure states.[1] These poems show symbolist technique, Ure says, rather than mythological symbolism. In symbolist poetry there is

> the same pressure of abstract idea, the same integrity of outward form. But here it is not the living personality that is enhanced, but the symbol itself. The symbol,...brings with it an aura of suggestions and associations, which spread out in ever widening circles, whereas the mythological personality, like Robert Gregory's, tends to drop back into itself, to fill out its own casing and produce a richer and more complex, though less diffuse experience.[2]

This argument shows the result of seeing symbolism as object rather than process. Ure does not relate the symbol to the context of the poems he considers, but takes it out and looks at it as an object. For instance, he says that

> In "On a Political Prisoner" it seems as if the poet is performing on an instrument whose notes pass almost beyond the range of human hearing. ...Beyond any possible intellectual analysis of the final stanza stretches a whole world of fresh experience....This experience takes us away from the political prisoner, who has become little but an object extruded and pushed away as the poem takes its upward leap.[3]

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[1] Ure, p.32.

[2] Ibid., p.49.

[3] Ibid., pp.49-50.

This is a sensitive and accurate response to the last stanza taken on its own. But the whole poem is concerned with freedom and imprisonment of mind and body, and the political prisoner is as much there in the final stanza as in the other three.

It is true that this stanza does present the complexity of actual experience, but so should a presentation of the human personality if it is to retain that unique individuality which Ure so prizes. Other unities are possible than just the human personality. Ure is willing to accept the combination of abstract and immediate only if the idea is directly concerned with a particular human being, a definition which would preclude much primitive mythology. Moreover, when Ure discounts poetry which does not fit into his "extended" definition of mythology, he is not only artificially limiting the range of mythology, but is also stating that poetry is myth-making of this specific kind. "In 'The Statues' the creation of myth is indeed the pressing of live lips upon a plummet-measured face",[1] Ure says, and Vivienne Koch tersely adds, "I cannot see that this hypothesis serves any useful purpose. Almost any poem in which the particular and the general unite, and this happens in many poems, would then be "myth". To be so generous in assigning myth robs this lately over-fashionable concept of any validity it may yet confer".[2] This is quite true, and underlines the pitfalls of subsuming symbol to myth. When Ure says that myth is created when the personal and

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1 Ure, p.27.

2 Koch, p.63.

the abstract cohere he is still in fact seeing the two as separate. He is describing the result, not the process of symbolisation: "The perception of form arises,...from the process of symbolization, and the perception of form is abstraction".[1] Ure is reaching towards a concept of myth and symbol as experience, activity or process, but he limits himself by his original premises and falls back on the more common divisiveness of vision.

Ure's narrow perspective deals only with the personal other, the objective dramatic, in direct opposition to the norm of lyric poetry, precluding also, it may be added, much of the substance of A Vision. This leads him to depreciate most of the major poetry of the later period, in which "the poet substituted his own personality for the manifold array of other men's"[2] in comparison with the "classical period" of the Robert Gregory elegy. Only at those moments when the poet achieves a reconciliation of the opposing elements in his thought through an image which is "a symbol, mythological in that its peculiar function is the co-inherence of the opposing elements" of passion and abstraction, is there any value in these poems for Ure. He does not consider how much value, or even sense, there would be in the image of the hanging of Attis's image "between that staring fury and the blind lush leaf" without the rest of "Vacillation", or in the chestnut tree without the posing of the problem in terms of actual experience of the body and mind of the earlier part of "Among School Children".

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1 Langer, p.59.

2 Ure, p.50.

Many of the later poems are dealt with in terms of A Vision, and Ure's uncertain grasp of its nature affects his attitude towards the poetry. Despite the fact that at one point[1] he says that Yeats avoided the danger of a private esotericism by constructing his own system rather than struggling to translate into verse philosophical concepts essentially foreign to his way of understanding, Ure nevertheless claims that A Vision is of first importance for the study of Yeats's work. The system provides answers to the perennial questions about reality, God and the soul, Ure says, however, "the method by which Yeats chose to answer these questions was entirely invalid if we suppose that he wanted to supply the answers for the use of others; but the answers had power to fulfil his own needs and those of his poetry".[2] On the other hand, Ure states that the elements of these ideas that appear in the poetry must be referred to the complete system for full understanding, implying that these answers that Yeats needed for himself and for writing the poetry are also necessary for the reader: the reader needs these "entirely invalid" answers to understand the poetry fully. Ure does not stop to question what sort of insight into a poem can be gained in terms of a system which the reader finds himself unable to accept intellectually.

This is in fact, of course, a false equation since A Vision is not of a nature to be accepted purely intellectually, as Yeats himself explained:

> Some will ask whether I believe in the actual existence of my circuits of sun and moon....To

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[1] Ure, p.64.

[2] Ibid., p.119.

> such a question I can but answer that if sometimes, overwhelmed by miracle as all men must be when in the midst of it, I have taken such periods literally, my reason has soon recovered; and now that the system stands out clearly in my imagination I regard them as stylistic arrangements of experience comparable to the cubes in the drawing of Wyndham Lewis and to the ovoids in the sculpture of Brancusi.[1]

But the equation is not false with respect to Ure. He is caught between disparaging A Vision when he considers it intellectually, and using it as a source of reference meaning for the poetry. He regards the symbol as something extrinsic to the whole, a concordance of abstraction and personality or passion which can therefore be supposed to have an external reference. And it is hardly surprising that those critics who cannot accept poetry as symbol, and hence the embodiment of its own meaning, cannot accept A Vision as something similar.

The result is that Ure's work on the poems often appears very similar to that of the critics discussed previously. His later papers on "The Statues" and "Supernatural Songs"[2] are collections of "source" materials, and in the book his discussions of poems are fragmentary, and therefore, though often very sensible, inclined to be too general. Partly for this reason, and partly because the seduction of external evidence is so strong, Ure's readings sometimes go astray, even occasionally to absurdity, as in the following example.

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[1] A Vision, Macmillan, 1962, pp.24-5.

[2] "'The Statues' A Note on the Meaning of Yeats's Poem", Review of English Studies, XV (1949), pp.254-257; "Yeats's Supernatural Songs", Review of English Studies, VII New Series (1956), pp.38-51.

Speaking of the line from "Byzantium", "An agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve", Ure comments:

> it is not fanciful to see in the reference to a sleeve that Yeats is thinking of the wide sleeves of a Japanese kimono: being of very light stuff these sleeves would catch alight the more easily and the fact that they do not enhances the image.[1]

But fanciful it certainly is with respect to the poem. It seems unlikely that anyone would naturally think of spirits as wearing kimonos, and it cannot, therefore, enhance the image. Ure thinks of it because he has related the line to a Noh play which Yeats had commented on.

The application of over-generalised ideas produces mis-readings such as the statement that "Death also is equated with this value [joy] in the little poem that begins the 'Vacillation' group", or the misunderstanding of the nature of Ribh's hatred implied by comparing it with the alleged commendation of violence and war in the Last Poems.[2] But it is the assumption that comprehension of the poems depends on A Vision and other external materials that is most representative of Ure's later views and those of many other critics. "The Second Coming" is one of the poems that Ure regards as dependent on the ideas of A Vision. It must be seen, he says, as more than a combination of traditional symbolism (Christian references) and "pure" or "occasional" symbolism:

> As we have seen, the shape with a lion body and the head of a man is associated with Yeats'

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1 Ure, p.69, footnote.

2 Ibid., pp.74 and 72.

> spiritualistic experiences....Furthermore, the idea of the birth of a new revelation is fundamental to the cyclical interpretation of history which finds expression in A Vision.
>
> And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
> Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?
>
> is a question which loses a great deal of its power unless we realize that behind it lies more than the attraction of a foundered belief and a famous name. A system of mythology is there as well - a system which to Yeats was more elaborate and full of meaning than Christianity itself....We must add the mythological system to the two kinds of symbolism, which become the less pure and the less traditional once they are recognised for what they are - images which are drawn from the inner landscape of the private myth, and which can only be fully understood by reference to the deserts and cities of the poet's mind.[1]

Once again, it is clear that Ure is regarding the symbolism of the poem as something extractable from it, and as completely identifiable with the symbolism of A Vision. "The poem would have been impossible without the cyclical system to which its meaning is so strictly parallel",[2] Ure says, and this may well be true but it need not mean that it is impossible to understand without that system.

The poem presages the coming of a new cycle, using an idea which is already established as part of the Christian tradition. Part of its strength comes from the startling variation on the accepted idea of a new incarnation of Christ. Since most Western readers would surely start from this, the poem if anything introduces

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1 Ure, pp.117-8.

2 Ibid, p.66.

the ideas of A Vision rather than relying on them for meaning. When, some years after writing the poem, Yeats mentions an image which had been present to him at an earlier period, "a brazen winged beast that I associated with laughing, ecstatic destruction", he adds a footnote that it was "Afterwards described in my poem 'The Second Coming'".[1] Ure (and Melchiori) quote this as evidence that the system is necessary to the poem, but in fact there is nothing in the poem to suggest "laughing, ecstatic destruction", nor is the beast described in the way Yeats's footnote seems to suggest. In the poem it does not have brazen wings but a "lion body and the head of a man, A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun", elements which associate it in the reader's mind with a sphinx-like image, something which is familiar enough to have some sensual meaning to the reader and yet distant and unknown enough to be free of unwanted associations with philosophy or religion. Quoting A Vision, Ure comments:

> Against Christianity, itself become reasonable, arises an "antithetical dispensation...which obeys imminent power, is expressive, hieratical, multiple, masculine, surgical". (A Vision, p.273). In prose Yeats struggles to express what comes so easily and so powerfully in verse....[2]

If the poem is more powerful it is probably because it introduces fewer ideas more immediately. It does not mention anything about "Christianity become reasonable"; instead it says that "the centre cannot hold", which has much broader reference and is part of a powerful visual image which gives meaning to the lines:

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[1] Explorations, 1962, p.393.

[2] Ure, p.66.

> Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.
> The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
> The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
> The best lack all conviction, while the worst
> Are full of passionate intensity.[1]

The poem shows the arising of a new dispensation which "obeys imminent power, is.. masculine, surgical", but is it necessary or helpful to think, while reading the poem, that the theory also says it will be "antithetical... expressive, hieratical, multiple..."? The second stanza of the poem depends on our acceptance of the first. Caught in the urgency of this wonderful verse, we agree that the world seems to be going to pieces and are therefore disposed to understand the immanence of the Second Coming, and even to some extent its nature, although this requires a stern suppression of our continued optimism about progress. The actual vision is put in the form of a personal prophecy, and its tentative, symbolic character is emphasised by the question at the end. Even so, it is possible that the sphinx-like figure is too far from our normal ideas to command our complete acceptance. The poem is deliberately stimulating ideas, and, as before, if anything it is the poem which might make us sufficiently interested to want to look further into the possibilities of such an idea, but it is itself speculative and visionary, and loses all immediacy if it is over-burdened with theoretical concepts.

A Vision must be put beside the general failure to accept the poetry as self-consistent as one of the

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1 C.P., p.211.

greatest stumbling blocks of Yeats criticism, standing as it does apart from and yet related to both prose and poetry, itself an enigma tantalizingly hung between philosophy and mythology, between discursive comment and fantasy, with the question of belief the last carrot, dangled provocatively by Yeats, only to be swallowed whole at the very last moment. And whichever way it is taken it has caused trouble. Where it has been dismissed as so much self-indulgent fantasy, Yeats may be regarded as a mere escapist, incapable of facing the important issues of contemporary life, tied to his dreams and therefore "inhuman".[1] On the other hand, where it is taken seriously it has caused just as much trouble because it may then come to be regarded as crucial to Yeats's thought and so crucial to the poetry.

Cleanth Brooks pays Yeats the compliment of regarding A Vision as evidence of a serious attempt by the poet to make a coherent formulation of the natural and supernatural and to establish a view of life and the universe as at once "logical and boundless". "If Yeats had merely been anxious to indulge his fancy, not caring whether the superstition accepted for the moment had any relation to the world about him - had he merely been an escapist, no system would have been required at all".[2] Brooks says firmly that the most important function of the system is to make possible "from the poet's standpoint" the richness and precision of such poems as "Sailing to

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1 As for instance by MacNeice and by D.S. Savage, "The Aestheticism of W.B. Yeats", P.Y., pp.173-194.

2 "Yeats: The Poet as Myth-Maker", P.Y., p.62.

Byzantium" and "Byzantium". His account of the development of the symbols of "Sailing to Byzantium" "in the poet's personal experience" as he notes, "will not", he adds, "in itself explain the fineness of the poem, or even indicate its aesthetic structure....But it may indicate in part the source of the authority which dictates the tone of the poem".[1]

This claim appears modest enough, but it does not prevent Brooks from explaining the poetry in terms of the system and therefore coming to regard it as dependent upon A Vision. Analysing "Byzantium", for instance, he says that "we shall not understand the third stanza nor the fourth fully unless we understand something of Yeats's theory of spirits" and that the phrase "blood-begotten spirits" is explicable if we consider a passage from the chapter on Anima Mundi in A Vision in which Yeats quotes from Hippocrates that man's mind is nourished by a substance from the blood, not from the food as the grosser body is, and if we also recall that Yeats said that our animal spirits were a condensation of images from Anima Mundi.[2] But in fact, although the phrase may be explicable in this way, it is hardly made readily comprehensible thereby. Yet it is in itself immediately comprehensible as metaphor.

Brooks goes on to note that the description of the spirits as flames accords with Yeats's description of "the condition of fire" in A Vision, while the phrase "flames begotten of flame" requires further reference to A Vision

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1 "Yeats: The Poet as Myth-Maker", P.Y., pp.75-6.

2 Ibid., pp.79-80.

and also to Yeats's essay on Shelley, providing a complex exposition of the relationship between the living, the dead, and the Great Memory or Anima Mundi. The result is oddly ironical for Yeats since it forces the understanding of these spirits and flames to be drawn from Yeats's personal conception of the Great Memory, rather than being conceived by each reader separately and originally from his own grasp of the memory and knowledge common to us all - what might be called anima mundi. Although the poem undoubtedly appears "rich and intricate" when seen in terms of A Vision, it also appears unnecessarily esoteric and unconvincing, having lost its essential connection with ordinary ways of thinking through the particularisation of the images to one set of ideas.

Brooks, despite his characterization of Yeats as a "mythmaker", treats A Vision more as a philosophy than a myth, and the poems as its adjuncts rather than its raison d'être. M.I. Seiden[1] follows the same prescription but develops it to much greater length and in doing so reveals the sort of fallacies it can lead to. Seiden takes A Vision to be the guiding formulation, calling it "a private religious faith", and the poems "fragments of a great myth - all based on that faith". And for Seiden poems, myth, and all are parts of the expression of the poet's beliefs. Hence Yeats becomes a didactic poet, and Seiden explicitly states that he found difficulty in discovering" a critical system which I might apply to the writings of a man who himself wrote, largely, to illustrate many kinds of dogma". It is not surprising,

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1 William Butler Yeats. The Poet as Mythmaker, 1962.

therefore, that Seiden is dismayed by the actual character of A Vision and accuses Yeats of "deliberate equivocation, such as the infuriating confusion of a literal with a metaphorical statement" when, as he says, he has "come to regard A Vision - or the mythology which it contains - as a kind of prose gloss to his collected works, both his earliest poems and those written long after he had in part rejected the book".[1]

Thus Yeats's symbols, Seiden argues, "whether mentioned in A Vision or not,...never fail to reflect his private-and-public mythology; that is to say, their very function in his poetry is absolutely determined by their explicit or implicit relation to A Vision". The method is "oblique": "When writing of the movements, the changes, and the conflicts both in human life and in the phenomenal universe, Yeats may invoke a symbolism which, in fact, describes the Great Wheel, the opposition of his imaginary sun and moon, the twenty-eight lunar incarnations, and the transmigrating soul".[2] This gives Seiden licence to apply A Vision to any poem, and he repeats the familiar argument that "we shall find it of extreme value, nevertheless, to approach even those of Yeats's later poems which are not mere versifications of a private myth as though they too were 'text[s] for exposition'", because "in this way we can better equip ourselves to understand and appreciate the subtlest meanings".[3]

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1 William Butler Yeats. The Poet as Mythmaker, pp.1, 73, 143.

2 Ibid., pp.163, 175.

3 Ibid., p.174.

In accordance with his conviction of a logical relationship between A Vision and the poetry Seiden proceeds by analysis, dividing the poems into four categories: psychological conflict and human types; nature gods, cycles and antinomies; history and historical processes; and the supernatural and its relation to man's physical life, and the symbols into another four groups: antithetical, primary, cyclical flux, and resolution of the antinomies. This method of classifying may help to superimpose a broad, general order on a complex body of work, but, although it is well suited to deal with material of a logical nature, it is less appropriate for material which creates its own meaning rather than standing in necessary relationship to other particulars. The division of the poetry according to subject matter or themes, for instance, is reasonable in terms of Seiden's assumptions since it corresponds to the major concerns of A Vision, but as applied to the poems themselves it is too mechanical if it is related to subject matter only or else either too vague or too limited if it is related to theme.

A major fault of Seiden's classification of the poems is that it does not make any distinction, and consequently he finds that "there is, of course, a good deal of obvious overlapping. The four major subjects of his poetry may be explicitly stated in a single poem". Alternatively, the poems appear to be mere repetitions of the same statements: "With few exceptions...the political poems which Yeats published after 1914 are a variation, as though all of them were a single poem, on specific, mythological - or historical - themes".[1] As this indicates, the

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[1] Seiden, pp.164, 233.

classification is too reductive and the discussion too general to yield significant insights into the ideas formulated and presented in the poems.

The symbol classification involves the common assumption that the symbols are separable from their contexts and have reference meanings. The classification is based on A Vision and the ideas, which had some precision within the system, are too specific when applied mechanically to the poetry, with the result that Seiden's lists of symbols might almost be re-titled: anything of which Yeats approved; anything he disapproved; any image of change with time; any image which, in its context, stands at a moment of balance. Thus, the "blood of innocence", because "signifying noble birth", is an antithetical symbol, and "odour of blood", "signifying a painful death", is primary. This example shows clearly how little real help the classification gives with respect to the poems. There is an opposition between these two factors in "Blood and the Moon" but it is far more complex than is suggested by the mere labels antithetical and primary, and cannot be resolved by relating these categories directly to what is said about them in A Vision.

This subjugation of the symbols to the geometrical schema of A Vision, which, incidentally, pays scant respect to the human meanings Yeats was trying to convey in it, leads as usual not only to carelessness in reading the poems but also to confusion and eventual stalemate in discussing the symbols. Seiden's symbols of cyclical flux, for example, include Malachi's stilts in "High Talk", the bottom rung of the ladder in "The Circus Animal's Desertion" and the crescent moon and the blazing sun of

"Lines Written in Dejection", all representing old age; and the bright moon in "A Man Young and Old" and spring in "Quarrel in Old Age" representing youth. Seiden comments, "Indeed whenever in poetry he correlates youth and old age with images borrowed from natural landscape or from ordinary human experience, Yeats is almost certainly making oblique statements about imaginary lunar phases".[1] But these symbols are also either primary or antithetical, the cycles being related to the antinomies by the gyres, and therefore, Seiden argues,

> Because [Yeats] constantly writes about a universe in which everything is part of an antinomy, in which all the antinomies are reducible to a symbolic sun and a symbolic moon, and in which the sun and the moon verge on being each other, any one of his symbols, as he would have us believe, has an indefinite number of connotations....Hence, all of his symbols, when they are approached from this complex point of view, ultimately mean the same thing;...[2]

Seiden is forced to admit that "Only when they are a portion of a given poem do Yeats's later symbols have somewhat limited meanings", but this does not induce him to consider them in their contexts and his conception of Yeats's symbolism, both in theory and practice, remains as confused as his understanding of the nature of myth.

## IV. The Poet as Symbolist

Just as Seiden looks for logical consistency of a discursive kind in what he has previously designated myth,

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1 Seiden, p.178.

2 Ibid., p.159.

so he applies simple identifications of details from A Vision to symbols despite his admissions that symbols are finally limited in meaning only by context, and that in Yeats's best poetry "subject and form are one; the symbols are both the things which they suggest and the ideas which their contexts define".[1] Seiden never applies this theory and never accepts in fact that symbols may be limited in meaning in poetry. Instead, he merely justifies his method by adding a convenient rider to his statements of Yeats's theory and practice of symbolism that, whether mentioned in A Vision or not, Yeats's most successful symbols "never fail to reflect his private-and-public mythology",[2] and continues to impose on the symbols an arbitrary limitation to the ideas of this external structure.

Seiden asserts that Yeats's practice followed his theoretical statements on the nature of symbolism, and the many other critics who base their arguments partly on these statements also assume this. It is worth noting that most of the essays in which these statements occur were written in or before 1913, and the essays on symbolism and magic at the turn of the century, well before Yeats had developed his mature poetic style. Engelberg further points out that Yeats told AE in a letter in 1903 that he rejected parts of the volume published that year (Ideas of Good and Evil), saying that such essays as "Moods" and "The Autumn of the Body" represent only half the orange,

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1 Seiden, pp.159-161.

2 Ibid., p.163.

that subtlety and mystery were necessary but that it was possible to have too much freedom. Yeats says in the letter:

> I think I mistook for a permanent phase of the world what was only a preparation. The close of the last century was full of a strange desire to get out of form, to get to some kind of disembodied beauty, and now it seems to me the contrary impulse has come.[1]

Even so, these essays do not fully support the imputations of limitlessness and infinitely suggestive ineffability in poetic symbolism which are read from them by such critics as Seiden, Henn and Melchiori.

Donald Stauffer, for instance, deduces that Yeats considered a poetic symbol to be "unified, meaningful, complex, untranslatable, inexhaustibly suggestive, moral, self-creating, slow-growing and often realized before understood, particular to the artist (or rather the artist will have a central group of symbols), and revelatory", and he later summarises this as meaning that "poetic symbols cannot be controlled; they cannot be limited; they cannot be explained".[2] On such a theory a poet could be little more than a mere recorder of his feelings as Stauffer realises, saying that in his practice Yeats was "lucky and gifted and original".[3] But this ignores and controverts many of Yeats's statements about symbolism. Even in these early essays it is clear that he does not think of the poetic symbol as vague; on the contrary, he

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1 A. Wade, ed., The Letters of W.B. Yeats, 1954, p.402, quoted by Engelberg, p.107n.

2 The Golden Nightingale, 1949, pp.28, 36.

3 Ibid., p.47.

says more than once that it should be precise. Shelley's fault was, he says, that he surrendered too much to the unconscious and to the lure of "images" which lack the precision of symbols, and adds that his symbols grow in clarity as he comes to use them with more conscious purpose.

In the essays on symbolism in painting and poetry Yeats defines three possible limitations on the use of symbols in poetry. "The systematic mystic is not the greatest of artists", he says, "because his imagination is too great to be bounded by a picture or a song".[1] The "liberation into infinite emotion" of the mystic is not appropriate to poetry, where the symbol is limited by being "mixed with the accidents of life". There is a systematic mystic in every artist, but in poetry symbolism is a matter of details, of words and their connotations, and it is these which define the nature of the symbol.

Symbols may be intellectual, emotional, or a mixture of the two. The first are "the playthings of the allegorists" and have no more place in literature than do the symbols of the mystics. He quotes a German artist who said that symbolism "gave dumb things voices, and bodiless things bodies; while ...[allegory] read a meaning - which had never lacked its voice or its body - into something heard or seen, and loved less for the meaning than for its own sake".[2] Purely emotional symbols, on the other hand,

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1 Essays and Introductions, 1961, p.150 (hereafter referred to as E. & I.).

2 Ibid., p.147.

produce excitement of the emotions which we cannot explain or define. Emotions without ideas are either too unbounded for the work of art as in mysticism, or else they leave us "amid the accidents and destinies of the world", with sensation but no conceptualisation or understanding of the emotion to guide and hold our minds.

The artist must clear his work of disembodied feeling and intellect, Yeats says. The first reduces art to "mere pattern or shadow", the second to mere subject matter. In a work of art it is necessary that the symbol should evoke intellectual concepts as well as emotions, although these concepts must not be more than "shadows thrown on the intellect by the emotions".[1] The metaphor here leaves some difficulty in paraphrasing this statement, but it is clear that Yeats means that the emotions should come first, but must be attached to concepts and must call these into play in interdependent effect. And Yeats goes on to specify the mechanism of this interconnectedness: it is through the connotations of words which have meanings for both the emotions and the intellect, and through the combination of emotional with intellectual word-symbols. He gives as example words such as "white" and "purple" which have only vague emotional reference unless they are related to words having intellectual content, but can be made to add precision to the meaning-complex of emotional/intellectual symbols, such as "cross" or "crown of thorns".

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1 E. & I., pp.160-1.

Yeats concludes that "it is the intellect that decides where the reader shall ponder over the procession of the symbols".[1] The "procession" is the concrete history of the symbol in all its connotations and suggestions, all its past uses. If the symbol is both intellectual and emotional, Yeats says, the reader "becomes himself a part of pure intellect, and he is himself mingled with the procession". That is to say, the reader is involved in the formulation of the meaning given by the symbol by the operation of his intellect, guided by the symbol's context, within that area of the "Great Memory" to which the symbol is related. The Great Memory is thus the totality of the symbolic meanings which have been found in the world. Because of this, the symbol is not arbitrary simply because it is not connected with some particular tradition of thought, although this may ensure it a complex and finely determined associational range. These "unofficial images", as John Crowe Ransom[2] calls them, require skill in their handling since they must be given the clarity of "proper" traditional symbols (this was the deficiency Yeats found in Shelley), but they do not necessarily lack a common history. Yeats says in the essay "Magic" that he tried to distinguish between traditional and personal symbols but found that the distinction had little meaning. The confusion between "personal" and "arbitrary" as applied to Yeats's poetic symbols arises from the assumption that the symbols in the poetry derive from Yeats's personal system or thought. A

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1 "The Symbolism of Poetry", E. & I., p.161.

2 "Yeats and his Symbols", P.Y., p.91.

critic making this assumption inevitably sees the symbol as arbitrary in the sense of having only denotative meaning in the poems.

Stauffer points out that in his essay on "The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry" Yeats takes symbols out of the poems and discusses them separately. Stauffer argues that this shows that the extent of a symbol's meaning is unlimited, and therefore

> To set one of Yeats's symbols in its place is simply to point our [sic] relations with other symbols and other thoughts; and to trace all of their implications, it is hardly too much to say, would require a close scrutiny of his entire work.[1]

Stauffer notes that this would be too extreme a demand, and attempts a compromise. Yeats's technique was to echo and allude to his own work, he says, and therefore it is necessary to know at least the main body of the poems to understand one:

> Fully to understand the meaning of "gyre" in one of his later poems, all of its uses in earlier poems must ideally be in our minds - not only when the word itself is used, but when it is only half-suggested, or left as a hidden image, not fully developed, but controlling the movement of the thought.[2]

This argument is logically circular because to understand the first poem one would need to understand all of them. When Yeats abstracts Shelley's symbols from the poems, he does not do so in order to understand any

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1 Stauffer, p.46.

2 Ibid., p.40.

particular poem and does not apply the meaning of the symbol in one poem to its appearance in another. He first understands a meaning from each separate appearance of the symbol and then compares and combines them for a broader contemplation of the general associations of the symbol, and particularly its relation to Shelley's ideal of what he calls intellectual beauty. Stauffer's method is to take one occurrence of the symbol, abstract a generalised statement of meaning, and then apply this to another occurrence. This gives no weight to the individual symbolic process, and to that "continuous indefinable symbolism" which Yeats says is the substance of all style and from which the symbolism grows and emerges.

Other critics besides Stauffer follow this approach. A.G. Stock and Unterecker argue that there are always other meanings latent in a symbol although each has an immediate meaning. Only a fragment of the total meaning may be in the speaker's mind at the moment, Stock says, and he may not even understand the rest, but the whole cannot be completely cut off from the image. Thus, the timeless immunity of the swans in "The Wild Swans at Coole", she argues, enters into Yeats's conception of the soul as a swan in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" and adds an overtone to the line "The swan has leaped into the desolate heaven".[1] But is this necessary? The swan-soul here is very different from the slightly sentimental picture of the swans in the earlier poem. If we think of it here as eternal, it is an eternity of a very different kind, not the eternity of nature with "companionable

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1 W.B. Yeats: His Poetry and his Thought, 1961, pp.192-3.

streams" and paired lovers. The soul is solitary, and it must face a life of apparent absurdity in which beauty and all human good are exterminated by time as life itself is. The poem is concerned more with life than with eternity, and the only immunity of the soul is its utter isolation.

Stock continues to link up Yeats's swan images, passing from "Leda and the Swan" to "Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931" because "the gods too are mirrors of the soul of man" and "divinity was seen mirrored in nature rather than shining beyond it" when Zeus reigned; and these thoughts re-echo in the last lines of the poem, "giving fuller meaning to the lament for the passing of romantic poetry". This is ingenious, but "divinity in nature", if it is an overtone of the romantic ideals as Yeats presents them here, is a confusing one, despite the presence of Homer. It is "traditional sanctity and loveliness", "whatever most can bless the mind of man or elevate a rhyme" that Yeats is celebrating here. But Stock passes on, via Homer, to "Vacillation" VII and VIII, and comments:

> ...by the standards of Christian asceticism all that glorying in passionate experience, summed up in the swan, is changed into the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life. From Homer to Helen; and Helen's beauty is inseparable in his thought from Maud Gonne's, and thus symbol is interwoven with living experience. The pattern of this tapestry is inexhaustible. It is partly this intricacy that gives Yeats's later poetry its intense power: it fills the simple words with deep, half discernible meaning.[1]

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[1] Stock, p.194.

It is true that "glorying in passionate experience" is part of the swan's general character as it appears in several poems and also has relevance to these sections of "Vacillation", but if there is a connection between all three factors, and further with Helen and Maud Gonne, it is concerned with the poet's habits of thought and life and not with these particular poems. It can be seen that this method of interpretation is little different, finally, from those discussed in earlier sections of this chapter.

At first sight Hugh Kenner's claim[1] that Yeats wrote books and not single poems appears to open new prospects, but its similarity to the theory that Yeats was writing a single great work might alert us to the danger inherent in the approach: that the book will be considered before the poems are fully understood and accepted as individual items, setting the conditions for all the misunderstandings described previously. This proves to be the case with Kenner. He maintains that a person encountering "Among School Children" out of context in the volume The Tower would find himself looking up Leda,

> and what Yeats made of her, and identifying the daughter of swan with Maud Gonne...and determining in what official capacity...the poet found himself doubling as a school inspector.[2]

Kenner also takes a very simple view of the poems, holding that The Tower volume shows a progression from renunciation of the body to possession of disembodied

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1 "The Sacred Book of the Arts", J. Unterecker, ed., Yeats, 1963, p.13.

2 Ibid., p.12.

thought (it begins with "Sailing to Byzantium" and ends with "All Soul's Night"). Similarly, Unterecker's suggestion that The Winding Stair and Other Poems should be seen as a counterpoise to The Tower, a return to life-consciousness after the emphasis on the decay of both body and civilisation in the earlier volume, leaves out of account parts of either volume which contradict or negate the distinction, in particular the concentration on the nature of art, and on the conditions of being an artist as they relate to the conditions of life.

It may be that, as B. Rajan suggests,[1] the poems do form "constellations of intention", and the recent essay by J.R. Mulryne[2] which points out that in the Last Poems "the transformation of the living to the sculpted image is everywhere" gives this some support; but this theory must not be indulged at the cost of the meaning of individual poems if it is to be maintained that the poetic experience has any peculiar value beyond that of the general contemplation of ideas. Rajan suggests that the worth of Yeats's method should be measured by its potential to create a whole greater than the sum of its parts, but the problem of what this whole is or should be remains, and it cannot be satisfactorily answered by examining the poems originally as parts of a whole, but only by working from examinations of the poems as wholes to a broader vision.

John Bayley says that the unspoken critical verdict is that in Yeats's case this is not so: the whole is not greater than the sum of its parts but considerably smaller.

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[1] W.B. Yeats, 1965, p.188.

[2] "The 'Last Poems'", Denis Donoghue and J.R. Mulryne, eds., An Honoured Guest, 1965, pp.124-142.

"His vision as a whole...is not taken seriously and not allowed as the real measure of his greatness".[1] Bayley attributes this failure to the fact that Yeats was a romantic poet, facing the dilemma of the romantic poet, of how to be both apart from life and engaged in it, how to concentrate on the romantic world of the imagination, and yet be an active participant in the world of men. Frank Kermode[2] also sees this as the central problem for Yeats, and central to any discussion of Yeats's conception of the work of art. Because the artist turns from life to contemplate the image, Kermode says, he is forced to pay a heavy price of suffering and isolation in his normal life. The result is that the status of the artist comes to be the theme of his poetry, as it is his major personal problem.

G.S. Fraser admires Kermode's treatment because it "sets Yeats in a context",[3] relating him to the romantic tradition and to the French Symbolistes; but the very firmness with which Kermode attaches Yeats to these traditions limits his perspective. In "The Symbolism of Poetry" Yeats says that if people were to accept the theory that poetry moves us because of its symbolism, it would be no longer possible for anyone to deny the importance of form,

> for although you can expound an opinion, or describe a thing when your words are not quite

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1 The Romantic Survival, 1960, p.82.

2 Romantic Image, 1957, pp.25-28.

3 Vision and Rhetoric, p.36.

> well chosen, you cannot give a body to something that moves beyond the senses, unless your words are as subtle, as complex, as full of mysterious life, as the body of a flower or of a woman.[1]

Kermode maintains that this sentence "contains, in germ, Yeats's whole aesthetic"[2] because he bases his entire thesis on the assumption that the image is the "primary pigment" of romantic and symbolist poetry. He argues that the essence of symbolism is the construction of such images as Yeats speaks of here: the body of a flower or of a woman, and that these images are characteristically romantic. But while it is true that this mannered and decorative metaphor does relate Yeats to the fin-de-siècle style, it is false to treat it as the only, or even the most important, element in Yeats's aesthetic, or even in the sentence quoted.

Yeats's prose, particularly at this early period, has a tendency towards a Pater-like formality and elaborateness of pattern which belies at times the cogency of his arguments. In "The Symbolism of Poetry" Yeats relates poetic symbolism to the nature of language and to the history of the symbol, and he deals particularly with an aspect of the subject - the quality of words which makes them suitable symbolic vehicles and the sort of effects which can be achieved by using words in this way - which is suited to discursive comment. His account does not suggest a homogeneous or static quality in the poetic symbol as Kermode's "image" theory does. In the sentence quoted the romantic aestheticism comes out in the choice

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1 E. & I, pp.163-4.

2 Kermode, p.51.

of the metaphor, not in the matter of the argument, which is concerned with the necessity that the artist should find exactly the right words. It is not the image which Yeats sees as the primary pigment of poetry, but words.

Kermode's argument follows from his convinction that Yeats worked according to the Symbolist aesthetic as represented by Symons. He suggests that the modern conception of the work of art as autonomous, non-discursive, and coincident in form and meaning evolved from the Symbolist aesthetic by way of the link between the poet and the occultist. Poetry by this definition is inexplicable, he argues, and only an act of magic can effect communication.[1] This is the familiar dualist position which results from regarding the poetic symbol as object, not process and ignoring its existence in words. It is noticeable that Yeats in this essay[2] speaks not of magic but of subtlety and precision.

Kermode picked out this sentence as characteristic because of its peculiar appropriateness for his thesis that the chief romantic image was that of the dancer, in whom beauty of form and movement are combined, and whose mind is engrossed in the formal movements of her body. Kermode traces the development of this image through the late romantics and in Yeats's prose and poetry, and in doing so reveals the usual effects of treating the symbol in isolation rather than as part of a context. Thus, in his discussion of "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes", he says that the dancer is Salome and supports this by

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1 Kermode, pp.113-4.

2 "The Symbolism of Poetry".

quoting a passage from Yeats's prose. This does indeed explain the link in full, but it is a purely private one. It is not necessary to the poem and does not appear there. To think of the dancer as Salome requires some negative effort to strip her of the "decadent" trappings which as Kermode notes, she acquired in Moreau and Wilde and which are now so firmly established.

This poem establishes a connection between Salome and the system, Kermode says, and he discovers the same connection in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen", part VI, in the lines "evil gathers head, Herodias' daughters have returned again" where, he says, she "again signifies a complete historical change of direction".[1] But there is no suggestion in "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes" or in the prose that she signifies this. In both the dancer is associated with the "moment of revelation". In the later poem Herodias is linked not to a dancer but to the variable wind, the "host of the Sidhe". There is no suggestion of formal perfection and no moment of visionary rapture in this image. The "decadent" trappings of Herodias and her infamous daughter are certainly here, and the evil forces are out of control, haphazard and blind, not rapt in the creation of beauty.

Kermode does demonstrate a consistency of imagery between Yeats and the late Romantics but his thesis depends too much on the symbol or image outside the bounds of art where it is too uncontrolled to provide more than relatively superficial connections with textual

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1 Kermode, pp.75-6.

occurrences. The thesis confines Yeats to too narrow a relationship, resulting in some forcing of the material to fit the argument. Bayley also aligns Yeats closely with the late Romantics and, although he is less confined to a single theory, having in fact a divided view of Yeats, the result, again, tends to force the poet into a category. Thus, he assumes that Yeats is a romantic poet and says that one reason why Yeats has been distrusted or misunderstood is that we expect a natural vision with some element of romantic idealism and spontaneous overflow, whereas Yeats's poetry seems "equally the product of theory and the will".[1] And this inconsistency produces exactly the effects Bayley mentions: Yeats appears to him as a posturing, abstract and unnatural Romantic.

The theory of symbol, Bayley maintains, exerts far less influence on the nature of Yeats's work than does the aesthetic background of late Romanticism, although his use of symbols was "perhaps the most important of Yeats's developments of the romantic and Symbolist tradition". He solved the problem of achieving a balance between the "indefiniteness of music" and the over-definiteness of allegory, Bayley says, by using emblem-type symbols "chosen so as not to blur the theme of the poem with a life of their own" and "shifting from one self-contained emblem to another with a conversational armature in between".[2] It is clear, however, that Bayley regards these emblems as closer to allegory than symbol. He

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[1] Bayley, p.85.

[2] Ibid., pp.91, 117, 118, 124.

mentions Yeats's distinction between emotional and intellectual symbols, and suggests that the emblem concept seems discernible in the latter, ignoring Yeats's mixed type of symbol. More importantly, this ignores Yeats's clear statement that intellectual symbols evoke intellectual ideas only and are not appropriate to art. The emblem may be relatively stable and well defined as symbols go, but it is certainly associated with a congeries of ideas which originate in and centre on emotions.

Engelberg and Parkinson agree with Bayley that Yeats's symbols tend to be allegorical, but we might put beside this charge Ransom's statement that Yeats's "unofficial images" - symbols which do not belong to a specific religious tradition in Ransom's terminology - are used with care "to see that the symbols are practicable and actually set in motion their intended imagery".[1] Like Christine Brooke-Rose, he compares Yeats's usage to Donne's for clarity accompanied by significance. Richard Ellmann and W.H. Stevenson[2] both maintain that Yeats moved away from allegorical usage in his early poetry to a thoroughly symbolic imagery. Ellmann shows how Yeats developed from a static use of Theosophical imagery to a usage in which his symbols are active and associationally alive.

In part, the degree to which Yeats's symbols appear allegorical depends on the kind of symbolism with which

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1 P.Y., p.94.

2 Ellmann, The Identity of Yeats, pp.35-7; Stevenson, "Yeats and Blake: The Use of Symbols"; Maxwell and Bushrui, eds., W.B. Yeats, p.223.

they are compared. If, for instance, they are put beside what Symons said Mallarmé aspired to - an autonomous image, free of discursive content, an instant evocation, without description, of the infinite - Yeats's concern for precision and comprehensibility must inevitably make his symbols appear systematic in comparison. Yet this is the kind of background which Kermode and Bayley set him against. And it is in attempting to point out the differences between Yeats and the French Symbolistes described by Symons that Engelberg finds Yeats's effects to be "not really symbolic".

He suggests that the Symbolistes moved towards the symbol by developing the subject or theme until it reached symbolic significance, using the world to evoke the symbol, whereas Yeats used the symbol to evoke the world, his interest being, ultimately, less in the symbol than in the thing evoked. Baudelaire's Paris begins as the city and eventually becomes the City, Engelberg says, but Yeats takes the sword and the tower in "A Dialogue of the Self and Soul", for instance, as symbols, and then lets them work on the imagination - the sword-symbol, for example, to evoke love and war. These are no longer symbols, Engelberg argues, but "symbolic abstractions, poetic short-cuts, allusions".[1]

The sword in this poem is not symbolic if that word is reserved, as many would reserve it, for conceptions which point beyond this world to the supernatural, but if the "divine essence" is taken in Yeats's sense, when, as

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[1] Engelberg, p.III.

in his essay "The Symbolism of Poetry", he speaks of "disembodied powers, whose footsteps over our hearts we call emotions",[1] the sword and its coverings, despite his calling it "an emblem of the day...against the tower Emblematical of the night", takes on emotional suggestions alluding not only to love, war, violence and court-ladies, as Engelberg says, but also to the battle which a man must wage if he chooses life rather than escape from life: the battle for self-hood and maturity, and the embroilment with his affections. And, just as the sword is consecrated, so this battle gained leads to blessedness. Yeats's original explanation of the emblem may be a poetic short-cut but it is so intimately involved in the structure of the poem that it becomes part of the symbolic development. There is no absolute boundary between allegory and symbolism because both reference meaning and intrinsic meaning may be present within the text. As Yeats points out, Dante used allegory to describe visionary things and Bunyan "by his preoccupation with heaven and the soul, gives his simple story a visionary strangeness and intensity".[2]

Bayley's divided view of symbolism and of Yeats's status as an artist becomes clear as it is seen that he not only regards Yeats's symbols as allegorical, but also assumes that external knowledge is therefore necessary to explain the poetry and looks for a discursive logic in the poem's structure. Dealing with "A Dialogue of the Self and Soul" he says that the passage:

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1 E. & I., p.157.

2 "Edmund Spenser", E. & I., p.368.

> For intellect no longer knows
> Is from the Ought, or Knower from the Known -
> That is to say, ascends to Heaven;

"could hardly be explained except by reference to material outside the poem itself", and accuses Yeats of achieving his resolution by a "tremendous gesture of assent" which is not determined by what has gone before.[1] If Bayley had not been thinking of Yeats's work as allegorical he would surely have considered the common meanings of these words and their relationships to what the Soul says here and what the Self says later. (See discussion pp.143,145). He regards Yeats's symbolism merely as an expedient for overcoming the problem of romantic isolation from the factual world. Yeats said that an acceptance of symbolism as the basis of poetry would bring

> a casting out of descriptions of nature for the sake of nature, of the moral law for the sake of the moral law, a casting out of all anecdotes and of all that brooding over scientific opinion that so often extinguished the central flame in Tennyson, and of that vehemence which would make us do or not do certain things.[2]

Bayley comments that "In the light of Yeats's later poetry this may strike us as odd" since these things are "precisely what distinguishes his poetic maturity". But symbolism has done its work and "enclosed in its super-human, mirror-resembling dream" Yeats can brood over scientific opinion, tell stories, and be as vehement as he likes.[3]

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1 Bayley, pp.115-6.

2 "The Symbolism of Poetry", E. & I., p.163.

3 Bayley, p.120.

Bayley appears to have ignored the second part in each of Yeats's clauses - "for the sake of nature" etc., and assumes that Yeats's anecdotes, comments on metaphysical or philosophical theories, and so on, are mainly personal, and have very little relevance for other people. Yeats solved the romantic poet's dilemma "by a series of brilliant and self-conscious experiments", Bayley says, of which symbolism was one, others being the adoption of a complex personality of masks and the development of the "artificial subject" of the artistic process. He brought Romanticism back to earth, "but at the cost of making himself and his poetry the measure of all things". Nothing is left outside the poetry which it must seek to become a part of rather than to absorb into itself, with the result that, finally, "Yeats's 'acceptance' of life often seems very much like a renunciation - where poetry is concerned - of what actually happens in life".[1]

These two extremes which Bayley finds in Yeats: matter incorporated into the poetry and therefore intellectual or personal, and concentration on style and the artistic process for its own sake, adapting the outside world to its own ends, are clearly associated with his refusal to accept the poetry as symbolic. To demand that poetry should transmute itself into something outside itself is to ask that it take up the method of science.[2] The fusing of self and outside world into symbol is the

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1 Bayley, pp.90, 128.

2 It is interesting to note that Bayley compares Yeats unfavourably with Auden.

method of poetry. Yeats's devotion to style was not to style as manner, style in the nineties sense, as Mizener maintains.[1] Style is more than a tool of self-expression because it not only reflects the development of some understanding within the artist's mind but is also a part of it, since the words themselves and all the details of their arrangement are the means of that understanding. And if the artist's experience and the relationship between art and life are often central to Yeats's poems as in many romantic poets, it is because the search to understand life through symbolic interaction with the environment is basic to man's natural response. It does not necessarily exile him from normal human concerns. Bayley himself notes Yeats's "passionate interest in human endeavour, sex and death", which, as he says, supplant Yeats's interest in magic. The themes of Yeats's later poetry are the universal questions of submission to another life or painful adjustment to the imperfections and ironies of this, the quality of life possible to us and the kind of attitudes we can afford and attempt. The assumption that Yeats was absorbed in an "art for art's sake" religion of art inevitably makes his work appear remote, impersonal and inhuman, just as the assumption that he was explaining a personal philosophy or mythology in a private language makes it appear recondite and eccentric. As Allen Tate said,[2] Yeats's critics have created his romanticism.

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1 "The Romanticism of W.B. Yeats", P.Y., p.126.

2 "Yeats's Romanticism: Notes and Suggestions", P.Y., p.105.

# CHAPTER III

## THE POEMS

This chapter consists of interpretations of a number of the later poems made by working directly from the texts of the poems and referring only to external information alluded to in the poems. Each interpretation is followed by a discussion of comments on the poem by other critics.

### A Dialogue of Self and Soul

The title indicates that this poem has the form of an internal debate, a form with an extensive history. Two of the later examples of the form which have obvious similarities to this poem are Marvell's "A Dialogue between the Resolved Soul and Created Pleasure" and "A Dialogue between Soul and Body". Both express the inner division and stress man feels between his mortal parts and that in himself which he feels to be immortal. The title of Yeats's poem suggests a less simple division than between soul and body. "Self" is a more inclusive term suggesting at once something closer to our essential being and something less wholly physical.

Soul begins the dialogue, enjoining the man to become wholly soul by concentrating on those things which appertain to it. The voice of the soul is not vehement or peremptory, but its solemn dignity is combined with a powerful coercive pressure. The words follow one another at a measured pace with a succession of even stresses. This continually repeated beat combined with the injunction to mental concentration has a mesmeric effect, not unlike

listening to one's own pulse. The soul tries to bring about the result it requires by the manner of its exhortation. The meaning, the rhythm, and even the structure of the stanza contribute to the hypnotic persuasion.

Taking the structure first, the stanza form is a combination of ten and eight syllable lines in the following order: 10, 10, 10, 8, 10, 8, 8, 10. This provides significant variation of the evenly stressed lines which might otherwise become monotonous, but it is also used to more positive effect. The three lines in the first stanza beginning with the word "upon" are deliberately hypnotic, drawing the mind, which has already been led to the "winding, ancient stair", up "the steep ascent" to the battlement and thence upwards into the night sky, focussing at last on the pole star. The shorter line "Upon the breathless starlit air" is followed by a pause (a ten-syllable line being expected) into which the reader's mind opens out, following the suggestion of the words. The return to regular iambic pentameter in the fifth line is a rhythmic, ritualistic fixing of the attention, accompanied by the hint of something fixed or certain in the universe, and the imperative of the sixth line, to which the mind is now prepared to respond, repeats this stabilization in a different way. The four-beat line is more suited to the imperative voice, and the repetition of this rhythm gives an evenness and continuity of effect. It is also an easier pattern for the mind to follow, particularly as it is rounded off by a return to the longer line.

The nature of the symbolism used also contributes to the summons of the soul. The winding stair is an ancient symbol with a peculiar fitness to the task of drawing the mind upwards, quite apart from any special significance it may have in Yeats's metaphysical scheme. Steps were designed for ease of ascent and the rhythmic patterning of the spiral form, combined with the fact that the end is not visible, helps the mind to concentrate upon the ascent rather than being distracted upwards too quickly. The externally unrewarding, harmoniously-patterned stairway is finely suggestive of the way the mind must close in upon itself before it can open out into infinity. This effect could no doubt be achieved in other ways, but the physical presence of the tower has allowed it to be contracted here into the minimum possible space, uniting the whole experience into this one stanza.

The description of the stair as "ancient" and of the battlement as "broken, crumbling" gives an important sense of time to the stanza. It adds to the tone of custom and authority and lends the mind movement in a dimension conducive to meditative thought, assisting its escape from the binding of the senses in the present moment. Night also helps. The "breathless starlit air" into which the thoughts emerge from the enclosed stairway induces them to expand. The word "breathless" cancels sound and touch, the silence affords no distraction for the ear, the stillness none for the senses in general. Everything contributes to heighten mental awareness. But the night is not a mere blank. It is "starlit": that is, it is invested with meaning, mystery, and a sense of infinite distance. The star "that marks the hidden pole" draws the mind from simple expansiveness and awe into one particular

area. The pole star is the guiding mark for travellers, but the pole it marks is hidden, physically to our senses and mentally to our conjectures.[1]

Despite all this coercion, self replies boldly, forcing the mind in the opposite direction, not inward into infinity, but outward to a very definite physical presence. The sword is consecrated to a very different idea: to war and human conflict. It is also ancient but, far from decaying, it is "Still razor-keen, still like a looking-glass Unspotted by the centuries". It has escaped the ravages of time because it has been protected by the scabbard, which in turn has been wrapped up in a piece of embroidered silk. In the stanza it is the silk which is emphasised, the scabbard being merely described as wooden. Thus in this stanza Yeats shows the paradoxical preservation of things which the soul would consider to be transient distractions from the ultimate truth. The poet invokes life in its most exciting aspects: love and war. And he does so through precise and vivid images, full of suggestions of light, pattern, and movement.

This stanza entirely reverses the previous one, beginning with a different kind of reverence - the "consecrated blade". Now the body is emphasised rather than the mind, starting from the phrase "upon my knees" in the first line. The word "still" is repeated several

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[1] This may be compared with the ending of Marvell's "A Dialogue between the Resolved Soul and Created Pleasure":

Chorus
Triumph, triumph, victorious Soul;
The World has not one Pleasure more:
The rest does lie beyond the Pole,
And is thine everlasting Store.

times, as "set...your mind upon..." was in the first stanza, giving the sense of permanence which before was to be found in negation. The other sense of "still" contributes to the presentation of the sword as an object of contemplation, but the contemplation is turned towards life. "Razor-keen" calls up ideas of violent action, and this action appears again in the word "torn", emphasised by its position as rhyme-word and line-ending, which projects all the violence of human love and stands in shocking apposition to the associations of gentle femininity of "flowering, silken, old embroidery".

The strong rhymes of the two shorter lines:

> ...torn
> From some court-lady's dress and round
> The wooden scabbard bound and wound,

give them the self-containedness of a rhyming couplet, further compacted by the internal rhyme in the second line and by the syntactical inversion which allows the meaning to be completed within the two lines. The effect is to emphasise the sense of the rhyme words. "Round", "bound", "wound", echo the turns of the spiral stair, but here enclose the object of contemplation in external human affairs. And, despite the effects of time and rough handling, the cloth is still able to lend sensuous beauty as well as protection to the masculine sword. It is "flowering" still, with the hint of natural processes of growth and the beauty of the earth, in total opposition to the colourless austerity of the soul's doctrine and of the crumbling tower.

In the third stanza the soul questions why a man "long past his prime" should remember such things when he should

be concerned with his soul. Life is a punishment for original sin, to be borne repeatedly by those who do not escape from the cycle by a life given to meditation and renunciation, to self-immolation in the "ancestral night". "Ancestral" leads the mind back into the past once more, through past generations to those primitive men who felt the spirits of their ancestors to be present in the night, and, through an almost universal pattern of belief, back before the Fall to the creation of life from the primeval darkness when night itself was our ancestor. Thus, ancestral night can deliver us from error by reuniting us with the creative force.

Though shaken to find the self so resolutely pitched against persuasion, the soul returns to the previous argument, but the command is much less assured. The repetitive form is reduced to the line "To this and that and t'other thing", a weak expression which is forced on the soul by the need to eliminate the distraction which a catalogue of the intellect's wanderings would induce. In contrast, the word "crime" in the last line is unexpectedly strong, and gains by its unexpectedness, shocking us into a new estimation of life and persuading by its very strength.

Self counters immediately, as before, with specific recollection and description. Attention is attracted by the introduction of a vividly personal note and interesting detail. Time and, by implication, place are particularised and once more we see the sword and the embroidered cloth, now made as rich as possible in sensuous suggestion by the colouring: "Heart's purple". Self sets life against its negation as day against soul's

night. The sword was a reflector of light, and its associations are further broadened here to support the self's rebellion against the designation of life as a crime. Self makes no denial, but claims the soldier's right to commit the crime, implying that conflict is man's proper environment, death and birth its natural consequences. The sacred nature of the sword is not pressed by the self at all, although the Japanese warrior class were the servants of a deity. Only the ageless continuity and the heroic nature of man's struggle, its dignity and beauty, are urged.

At the beginning of the fifth stanza the soul, having learnt its lesson perhaps, presents, rather than argues, its case. The state of contemplative rapture is magnificently embodied in the image of overflowing water (strictly unspecified, but water is the most natural association). The self, which is bound up with the senses, is forgotten because the intellect is no longer busy separating the self from the other or concerned to justify its own actions through uncertainty of its selfhood. Heaven is a state of total dissolution of self, allowing the soul to be reoccupied by the divine essence.

But it is the "basin of the mind" which must receive the flux while the man lives. The emotions must be filled, the intellect numbed before soul can achieve its aim. This stanza re-enacts this process and reaches an ecstatic climax at "Heaven", but then the soul carries the implication to its logical conclusion: complete dissolution of self is possible only with the death of the body, complete forgiveness for the crime. But then the soul will no longer have an existence in a separate mind

and so will no longer have a voice. If the soul in its meditation actually reaches heaven then its tongue is literally as dead as a stone. The suggestion of intractable solidity is equally as important here as the associations of absolute lifelessness. It produces a kinaesthetic image: the feeling of the mouth being stopped up with a lump, preventing speech and breath, and so filling the head with its gagging sensation that the mind is also stopped. The soul is brought to total constraint despite his efforts to escape into infinite freedom because the self is still alive and the two are irrevocably joined. Escape from life is necessarily incompatible with living.

Therefore, as in the second part of the poem, the voice of the poet must be the voice of the self. And once again self reverses what the soul has said, deliberately contrasting idea and image. Self speaks, not of the dead, but of "A living man" and says that he is blind, but not through mystical insight. Instead, he is compared to the blind man of the Biblical story who falls into the ditch. In place of the overflowing fullness falling into the basin of the mind is the ditch-water he must actually drink, the overflow of the earth. For the living man there is no ascent to heaven, only the fall to the impurity of the earth, yet, strangely at this point, self does not seem dismayed.

Self then reviews the life he is willing to live again, now showing its struggle bereft of beauty and heroism, and even of dignity: "ignominy" in boyhood, "clumsiness" in adolescence and immature manhood, ugliness as an adult. "How in the name of Heaven", he asks, can

man avoid taking on the lowest of aspirations for himself, the "defiling and disfigured shape" he sees mirrored in the attitudes towards him of other men? He must use their judgment of him very largely to form his opinions of himself. Conflict is not confined to the physical, and the mirror-like sword of the self-confident warrior is now transformed into the harshly judging eyes the fearful, self-conscious man feels upon him. The repetition of the word "eyes", aided by the internal rhyme and consequent rocking rhythm of line five, imitates the suggested reflection, and the pattern is reiterated in the repetition of "shape". The effect is much harsher than the similar ones in stanzas one and two of the first part of the poem, and perhaps with reason since it produces a shifting effect, suggestive of the moral uncertainty and compromise created by man's isolation among his fellows.

The phrase "How in the name of Heaven" is not merely a colloquial exclamation, although it does correspond in tone to the harsh realism of the stanza. The capitalization of the word "Heaven" calls to mind the soul's words, suggesting that this is an answer to the soul's demand that man should escape. Since he must live in the world, he cannot escape the brutalising effect of conflict simply by yearning towards heaven. Release from the dissociation of "Knower" from "Known" and "Is" from "Ought" depends on complete self-knowledge and this is not achievable solely in the face of heaven. The last two lines seem to imply that in any case escape would be pointless if a man can arrive at some conception of honour, but their meaning is made uncertain by the ambiguous construction and the metaphorical usage. The words "wintry blast" do not relate closely to the intricate pattern of imagery in the

rest of the poem, and, since this is one of Yeats's chief means of conveying significances in this poem and elsewhere, the lines must rely on their own clarity. There are two possible ways of interpreting "wintry blast": as a general reference to the "winter of our discontent" or the antagonism of other men, and as a metaphor for old age.[1] The latter interpretation is supported by the chronological sequence of boyhood - adolescence - manhood in the stanzas preceding these lines. The ambiguity depends on whether the phrase "in the wintry blast" is related to the subject or the object of the clause, which thus means either that honour may come to him in the wintry blast of discord, or may come to him at last in old age. The question implies that an escape from the miseries of life is not a satisfactory substitute for a life of honour. The values of the warrior, of active living, are more important.

In the following stanza self answers the earlier questions "What matter if the ditches are impure? What matter if I live it all once more?" by a re-affirmation of his belief in the values of life and his acceptance of its

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1 The line has a Shakespearian ring, and if the first calls to mind Gloucester's opening speech in Richard III largely because of the associations with mirror-images and deformity, the second is a well-established metaphorical relationship frequently used by Shakespeare. This is an example of a Simple Replacement metaphor and shows, as Miss Brooke-Rose suggests, a characteristic ambiguity; but it seems highly probable that Yeats intended the ambiguity as it relates to the meaning of the poem. The concept of honour may come to a man in his reaction to the antagonism of others or in the recognition of approaching death, but however it comes, it is more important for the living man than escape.

struggle, but he does not now "claim as by a soldier's right A charter to commit the crime once more". Instead, he accepts all the baseness and humiliation of "A blind man battering blind men" in a ditch. The last four lines of this stanza must face the charge of inadequate dramatization. It is true that the relationship between man and woman must be responsible for much of the discord and folly, but the wooing of "A proud woman not kindred of his soul" seems at once too particular and too general to be considered the "most fecund ditch of all". It has the suggestion of a personal reference but lacks the intimacy which lends interest to Sato's sword, for instance. Such interest would be out of place in this general survey of life, but if this flat statement had been given the vividness of imagery of the rest of the poem, and this includes the general statements in this second section, it would have been easier to accept.

Having accepted life at its worst, the labour of self-examination can begin because the worst in the self can now be accepted also. If life is valued simply for itself, without the necessity of setting up heroic ideals against the desire for spiritual release, failures and shortcomings can be forgiven. But complete self-knowledge is necessary for complete forgiveness, and therefore every past action or thought must be analysed and appraised, accepted for what it is. The phrase "forgive myself the lot!" deserves its exclamation mark as the culmination of this process. It is both surprising and yet fully prepared for.

The last five lines grow from this new feeling of content to a simply-expressed, Blakean hymn of joy in life which stands in contrast to the ending of the soul's

argument in silence and obstruction. The ditch becomes a stream and finally a great flow of sweetness which enters not the mind but the breast. Self claims that forgiveness is possible in life, and that it comes from within rather than from a divine or supernatural source. With his escape from self-accusation self is able to reach the state the soul called heaven, where man is no longer separated from the other - "I" changes to a triumphant "we". The escape proposed by soul necessitated that man be "deaf and dumb and blind", but self's release from mental anxiety involves facing rather than turning away from the world: he looks, laughs and sings. In this state man himself achieves a state of sanctity, being united not with the infinite, but with everything that is present to him:

> We are blest by everything,
> Everything we look upon is blest.

Much of the critical comment on this poem has been dealt with in detail in chapter two. The point made by Bayley and Donoghue,[1] that the poem ends with a gesture which is not logically prepared for and the casting vote is delivered "before the poor soul has well begun", has already been discussed, and my reason for opposing this view emerges clearly, I think, from the interpretation of the poem. Allied to this is the claim by D.S. Savage[2] that because the determinism of Yeats's system frees the individual from moral responsibility and from all uncertainties Yeats could adopt an attitude of "hard,

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1 Bayley, p.115, Donoghue & Mulryne, p.108.

2 P.Y., p.186.

scornful acceptance" and could "go on to that celebration of blind, passionate, aimless life out of which some of his most magnificent verse arose" (Savage here quotes the last two stanzas of "Dialogue"). Savage applies his judgment of the system directly to the poem, without giving the poem the individual attention it requires. The second part of the poem can hardly be described as a "celebration" of this view of life at its most painful, nor is his acceptance "scornful" but involves the putting aside of ideals until they can be grounded in the hardest and ugliest details.

Whitaker suggests that the salvation through self-knowledge may itself be used by the ego as the basis for a new pride, but adds "But that pride is again known and rendered - in the consciously rhetorical phrase 'such as I', as in the allocation of this speech to 'My Self' in opposition to 'My Soul'".[1] This seems to imply a rather loose understanding of the poem as a whole, since the speech could not possibly be attributed to the soul. Yet Whitaker may be right in finding a new pride here. It is the pride necessary to the ideal of honour, and is achieved through the utmost humility. If the poem did not demonstrate this conception of honour, L.C. Knights[2] would be justified in saying that this poem and "Vacillation" (discussed below) show a "recognition of the need for integration rather than the achieved wholeness". Taking these two poems together, one might say that they show a

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1 Whitaker, p.161.

2 "W.B. Yeats: The Assertion of Values", Southern Review VII (1941), p.40.

recognition of the continued need for re-examination of the claims of the soul and of the opposing aims and attitudes of the personality.

Parkinson[1] claims that poems such as "Dialogue" and "Vacillation" are partly "pre-poetic" because the poem is a step towards the condition in which the contemplative act is possible. The exaltation shown in the poems can be questioned, Parkinson says, since, "if this is the poem's substance, why is it not the very texture of the whole?" But in "Dialogue" the exaltation is in a sense a gift which comes unasked when the poet fully accepts life as conflict. The poem is "about" conflict, and this is the very texture of the whole. But there may be some justification in the complaint that this poem lacks "exaltation". Although the second section does enact the process it describes, dragging the reader down into the ditches and fighting its way out through the moral confusion, its generality, compared with the particularity of the sword and tower images in the first section, does produce some reduction of vividness and of concentration.

Blood and the Moon

The first section does not function as a complete poem but introduces the major themes. These are the concentration upon place and people, and upon the specific emblem of the tower and the nature of the people who built it; and the opposition between the poet's declared satiric intention and his benediction of the place and of the tower and its associations. The element of contrast

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1 Parkinson, pp.50-51.

appears first in the third line with the change from benediction to "A bloody, arrogant power", and is repeated in the unexpected word "Uttering" in line five. The main meanings of this word are "speaking or saying", or perhaps "producing", and "spreading out, broadcasting". The antecedent of the pronoun at the end of the line could possibly be either the tower or the race, but the nearness of race, the presence of the semi-colon, and the parallel construction of the phrases beginning "Rose..." which compare the domination of this power to the domination of the storm-beaten cottages by the tower suggest that the antecedent is "race". The particular use of "uttering" is not further explained at this point, but the explicitness of the statement "I have set A powerful emblem up, And sing it rhyme upon rhyme" brings to mind this word and hints at a parallel.

The short, two-beat lines, rhyming in quatrains, and the rocking rhythm assisted by the repeated phrase "In mockery..." combine to give a song-like quality to the stanza, which begins as a simple hymn and ends as a satirical ballad.

The second section opens out abruptly into a long, discursive line and conversational tone quite different from the tone of the first section. In that section the emblem might have been the tower or it might have been the poem about it ("sing it rhyme upon rhyme"), or both. It was compared to the tower by implication, from the structure of the stanza and from the phrase "set up", suggesting the raising of the tower, and contrasting with the opposite use of the word "uttering". In the second section the emblem is clearly the tower, but it remains at

first the emblem of certain civilisations. Alexandria's beacon suggests a light of learning as well as the power of empire. Babylon's ziggurats were, as we are told, microcosms of the universe, from which the astrologer-priests consulted the gods.

Now, within the same stanza, the association swings back to the implications of "uttering" and "singing". Not only civilisations have tower emblems: poets, too, may use them as Yeats is using this one, and with similar associations of intellectual power. The next stanza, and the rest of section two develop this link between writers and the powers of the intellect and of civilisations. The place mentioned in the first section is now seen to be Ireland, and dominant among the "bloody, arrogant power" who gave a tongue, and hence a positive existence, to the race are four famous eighteenth century Anglo-Irishmen: Goldsmith, Swift, Berkeley and Burke. These men Yeats claims for his ancestors, who have climbed before him the winding stair of his symbolic Irish tower.

The arduous effort of climbing this stair is emphasised by the rhythm and reiteration of meaning in "winding, gyring, spiring" and by the associations of the word "treadmill". The various strengths which enabled them to "travel there" are described in the following stanzas: Swift, driven to fury by entrapment in the physical state of man, hating the corruption of the ideal by the body; Goldsmith, with the wit and worldly wisdom of "The Bee", aware of man's ordinary social state; Burke, who saw man as part of an organic community, denying abstract theories of the equality of man and asserting the aristocratic virtues of strength and magnanimity; and

Berkeley, whose power of mind could burn away the necessities of the physical universe and convert it into the thought of God.

These discursive stanzas are enlivened by internal contrasts: the sudden violence of the passage on Swift against the calm of that on Goldsmith, the "blood-sodden breast" against the "honey-pot" of the mind; the deliberate pace and elaborate metaphor reflecting the measured cadences of Burke's dignified prose and also his autocratic philosophy against the witty treatment of Berkeley's transformation of substance to mind and spirit, the haughty birds of the great-minded against the "pig of a world". The four contrasting minds extend over the range of man's existence, treating his emotional, social, moral and metaphysical conditions. These are the men of his blood, arrogant in many ways, but with the "strength that gives our blood and state magnanimity of its own desire". The words "blood and state" echo a mutability poem by James Shirley[1] which places final value in "the actions of the just". Although these words have already acquired a complex of associations within the poem and the reminder of death introduces an odd note at this point, the significance of this echo may appear later.

The description of the mastering power as "bloody" remains unexplained except for the association with Swift's "blood-sodden breast", but section three introduces new associations for the word. Contrasting again with the long, uneven lines of section two and its

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1 "The glories of our blood and state", Song from The Contention of Ajax and Ulysses.

general expansiveness, this section consists of a single stanza of decasyllabic lines. The lyrical quality of the first lines contrast also with the energetic, though ceremonious, language of section two's climax, as with the final image of "intellectual fire". But the calm of the first line, "The purity of the unclouded moon", is shaken already in the second by the implication that the pure whiteness of the moon's light is a challenge of some kind, "flung" upon the tower floor. This purity is untouchable by time, unmarked by the blood of men.

This seems at first to be actual, physical blood, shed by violent men for the meanest motives, men whose brutality is emphasised by the fact that they simply "stood...and shed blood". But this is disputed by the repeated assertion that this blood was unable to stain the moonlit floor. The word "jet" operates in two ways, at least: as a jet of liquid (i.e. blood) and as a black stone or mark. The phrase "cast a...jet" has several meanings, among which the following may be relevant in this context: ostentatious display, parade or boast; an impulse or effort of mind; an idea, device or contrivance. The first suggestion which emerges from this is that they were unable to meet or oppose the challenge of the moon's purity. There is too much emphasis on the action of these men for the phrase "blood of innocence" to be interpreted merely as meaning that their victims were innocent. In any case it seems unlikely that Yeats would present so simple a view of human affairs. The innocence, the incapacity for harm, is theirs also when compared with whatever is represented by the moon. The blood they shed has no existence in that context.

Although the tower-room floor is unmarked, there is "Odour of blood on the ancestral stair". The poet and his ancestors who have climbed the stair may not have shed any blood, but they are drunk with the smell of it, and it is clearly these men who feel the challenge of purity, as if they were the murderers. Their guilt thus apparently lies in their consciousness of their human impurity, despite their attempted ascent to wisdom. There may possibly be an association here with another meaning of "cast a jet": in contrast to the murderers who were unable to make an effort of mind, those who gather on the stair have been able to conceive of the ideal and are maddened by the taint of their blood.

The final section turns again to the tower. Peacock and tortoiseshell butterflies "cling" to the windows, which have the dust of the earth, the glitter of the moon, being the media which let the beauty and purity of the moonlight through to the tower-inhabitants. The butterflies are earth creatures, yet seem part of the skies. They are the beauty which has been created on earth, but they are now apparently lifeless, or at least unmoving. The only living things are a couple of dun-coloured moths. The suggestions of these lines are confirmed when the poet repeats the mocking statement of the first section, this time as a question: "Is every modern nation like the tower, Half dead at the top?"

The change from statement to question is important, because now the poet withdraws his mockery, "For wisdom is the property of the dead, A something incompatible with life". Wisdom is beyond man's reach as it is beyond his power, and his best creations are mere butterflies, pretty

creatures but not sublime, and still part of the earth, with only a seeming connection with the source of the light of the imagination. Thus, if the nation is half dead at the top, it could hardly be otherwise if it seeks for wisdom. But this alone would be a very unsatisfactory resolution, and Yeats does not leave it there. Because the division between life and death, power and wisdom is absolute, it does not prevent their interaction. The moon is immaculate and unattainable, but it does appear to man. Man, in his efforts to reach it, is still subject to the rule of death, but if he were not he would have to forfeit power along with blood. And the combination of power and striving, intellectual strength and will, is what makes man great and gives him the power to express himself and so to live most fully. This perhaps explains the allusion to Shirley's poem, which also states that all man's glories must fade

but

> Onely the actions of the just
> Smell sweet, and blossom in their dust.

Those who ascend the stair must die before they can reach up beyond the tower into the moonlight, but their efforts remain as emblems for those who live after them.

Recognition of the allusion to the Shirley poem is not necessary to an understanding of the poem, any more than it is necessary to consult all of Shelley's references to towers to understand the point Yeats is making about them. At the most, the latter case assumes some knowledge of Shelley's attitudes and of his poetry, but even this is not strictly necessary since Yeats explains his reference, and the bare necessity is to know that Shelley was a poet.

The poem by Shirley acts as a counterpoint to Yeats's poem if it is known; if not, the immediate poem is enough.

This kind of allusion is justified because it leaves the poem intact, unlike the interpretations made by Seiden, for instance, which depend on knowledge of Yeats's prose:

> He recalls in "Blood and the Moon" that centuries ago a murder was committed on the winding stair at Thoor Ballylee. But, he observes, time has washed away the stains of blood; and he hopefully adds that the gyres of history must wash away, also, the violence in our twentieth century world.[1]

The poem does not mention a murder on the stair, nor is there any suggestion that time has anything to do with the spotlessness of the moonlit floor or that the violence associated with the power appropriate to blood must be eradicated. Similarly unjustified is Seiden's statement that the conclusion to the poem is a "dramatic avowal" that "human culture originates in - and is pre-determined by - Anima Mundi".[2] The poem is concerned with the products of great men and great civilisations, which may be inherited by later generations, but it contains no suggestion of a concept such as Anima Mundi. This, like Seiden's curious interpretations of the "blood of innocence" and "odour of blood" mentioned previously (page 114 above), is an unwarranted introduction of the special theories described in Yeats's prose.

The close organisation of section three in particular has contributed largely towards the varying interpretations

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1 Seiden, p.249.

2 Ibid., p.245.

of this poem. John Unterecker sees the moon itself, and not the desire to reach its purity, as the cause of the "drunken frenzy":

> ...the "pure moon is made the ultimate agent of corruption, the cause for the "blood-saturated ground" at the foot of the tower. Though for the seven centuries that the tower has stood the moon has washed its foundations in innocent blood, the "arrowy" murderous "shaft" of moonlight has itself remained pure.[1]

This implies that the moon has incited the slaughterers to violence also, but there is no suggestion that the motive for their killing is an attempt to defile the immaculate moonlight. Their motives are clearly stated to be otherwise: simple consequences of the unenhanced condition of blood.

It is questionable also whether the slaughterers stand at the foot of the tower, since the antecedent of the word "there" in the fifth line of section three appears to be "floor" in line two. This seemingly trivial point has some importance in the interpretation of the poem by T.R. Whitaker,[2] who sees in the poem only a personal advance in self-knowledge for the poet, rather than the more general statement I have suggested. Whitaker considers the reversal of the final stanza to be a denial of the positive values attributed to Swift, Goldsmith, Berkeley and Burke in section two, brought about by the poet's realisation that "Spirit and blood no longer meet and interpenetrate in the miracle of various life". At

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1 A Reader's Guide to W.B. Yeats, p.207.

2 Whitaker, pp.211-215.

the end, the poet is left "half-dead, barred from full life or death", but with the improvement over "Swift's middle state" that "As the victim of his historical moment, he has at least the wisdom appropriate to his condition: ...he knows himself".

Three main points contribute to this interpretation. The first is related to the relationship between "soldier, assassin, executioner" and the "we" of line eleven in section three. Whitaker, like Unterecker, does not find any contrast between the place where the blood is shed and the place where its odour lingers. He says the blood is on the stair. Whitaker prints "here" for "there" in line eleven,[1] and if one read it in this way it would certainly reduce the element of contrast which I have suggested. But if line ten does not point to a contrast it does not have much meaning except as a "poetical" exclamation. Probably because of this reading, Whitaker interprets "we" as "men of the present time", not as "those who ascend the stair", and this in turn may explain why he thinks of the speaker as "now barred from physical power" and the stair as "no longer the gyre of life but a deathly limbo between blood and the moon".[2]

The second point then arises naturally from this interpretation. Whitaker evidently refers the words "No matter what I said" to all of the poem, commenting that the "abrupt and arrogant reversal is tinged, he knows, with 'drunken frenzy' and bitter mockery".[3] But this

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[1] The Variorum Edition of the poems gives only "there".

[2] Whitaker, p.214.

[3] Ibid., p.215.

"bitter mockery" is expressed in a surprisingly light tone and there hardly seems to be any "drunken frenzy" in the first few lines of this last stanza. The tone relates this statement to the immediately preceding lines and to the mockery of section one. It does not seem likely that the statement refers to the description of the significance of the tower because this is less a part of the "argument" of the poem than a definition of its terms. The "argument" refuted by this statement surely lies in the opposition of blood and moon. The present state of the tower is recognised to be less important than the realisation that, although success in attaining wisdom is impossible, the attempt is everything.

Whitaker calls the first lines of the final stanza "a half-mocking perception of beauty in death" and goes on to speak of the poet's "deathly yearnings", but once again the tone is wrong. The mockery lies in the perception of the dullness of the living things - the night-moths - and the concern is for the living rather than the dead - "Is every modern nation like the tower, Half dead at the top?" The moment the speaker realises that the desire for the absolute of those who climb the tower can only be fulfilled in death he retracts his mockery. And the tone of the concluding lines is not one of "bittery mockery" and disillusioned recognition of impotence. The effect of making the moon an active agent in the last lines is to cause the reader to imagine the action of the moon's appearance, inducing an upsurge of the spirit as the mind moves up into the clear moonlight. The assurance and the final serenity of the conclusion is clearly opposed to the rather hysterical resolution Whitaker suggests. The blessing on the tower is not withdrawn. The "powerful

emblem" stands and the best in man combines its virtues and its necessities.

The compression of section three, created in part by the multiple use of the tower symbol, undoubtedly contributes to such interpretations as Unterecker's and Whitaker's, to which may be added those of MacNeice and Seiden. The "real" historical tower plays against the theme of perfection and power, and unless such factors as the reason for giving the motivations of the killers are considered, the relationships may well be obscured. It is not sufficient to dismiss this as "almost hysterical rhetoric",[1] as it is not sufficient to sum up the aspirations of the people of the tower as a "deathly yearning". Yeats's method demands continuous attention to every detail of implication and association because he uses all the resources of the method for interrelating sense-data and mental response. As stated previously, he delights in precise, but complex, patterns and the structure of these longer, compound poems is peculiarly suited to such an approach.

## Vacillation

Like the sun man runs his course between extremities: day and night, birth and death, joy and misery, and many others. The title indicates that the poem is concerned with the attempt to reconcile or accept these antitheses. The flaming sword of the angel at the gate of Eden and the fires of purgatory and hell are the retribution for Original sin and sin in life. Our consciousness of sin

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1 B.L. Reid, William Butler Yeats. The Lyric of Tragedy, 1961, p.203.

makes these realities to us and kills our joy in life. Death, recurring in the heart's remorse and coming at last to the body, makes all life futile and meaningless, especially, since it decides the quality of our lives, that metaphorical life of the heart. This life is perhaps at its peak in the state known as joy, but what value has joy if we should be occupied with repentance? The short last line leaves a silence in which the question poses itself forcefully.

In the second section the antinomies are given vivid form in the two-sided tree, each side of which is only half of the whole "and yet is all the scene": taking the metaphor literally, is all that can be seen from either side, perhaps; each is a complete stage setting, a complete view of life or setting for action. The second paradox of this image of opposites is more difficult. The link between the "brand, or flaming breath" and remorse and death in the first section and the "glittering flame" and "staring fury" of this section suggests that the flames that burn away our remorse are also our consciousness of sin and therefore renew remorse. Similarly, our delight in the world and in life also feeds on itself. Each side persists eternally.

The cult of Attis involved the hanging of masks in pine or fruit trees and was an ecstatic cult like that of Dionysus with whom Attis came to be identified. The hanging of the image here suggests the artist who, in a state of imaginative exaltation stands between the two possible ways of life, the life of passionate involvement in the senses, blind to eternity, and that which is committed to a wider vision. In this state the artist may

have to rely on what is given to him in his inspiration but he is not subject to grief, which may perhaps come from either side, from loss or from remorse. This may be joy but it is not certain since this is only a negative affirmation.

The third section presents a solution which divides life into two halves, corresponding to the two halves of the tree. The blind, lush leaf of youth should be enjoyed as fully as possible, although there are still opposing demands to fulfil and perfection and complete satisfaction are not possible. Youth having been consumed, death must be no longer forgotten and must be taken as the measure of life. Joy is to be found not in life but in death or in an attitude to death. Men should come "proud, open-eyed and laughing to the tomb".

But the poet seems to have ignored the warning. Although part of his mind may urge him to think only of eternity, he is a poet still. At past fifty he is seen sitting in "a crowded London shop" - in the midst of the world he should have put behind him. He is not wholly involved in that world, however. He gazes out at it, but he has been reading and somewhere between what he has read and what he sees his contemplation reaches a heightened state in which he knows what surely must be joy, blessedness. This is by no means the eternal beatitude of the saint at which the ascetic aims but it shares the happiness and the potency of the saint.

Now another aspect of the antinomies appears, and another vacillation of mood. In section five the gold and silver of part three become the sun and the moon, and the "abounding foliage", no longer representing the vitality

of youth, is transmuted into "cloudy leafage of the sky". The first four lines pass naturally from simple description of summer sky and moonlit field to their suggestions of contemplation of spiritual bliss and of the earth's more disturbed beauty by means of the opposition of sky and field and by the almost kinetic effect of making the mind turn upwards to imagine the leaves of a tree above the head seen against the sky and then upwards again to turn the leaves into clouds, followed by the descending effect from "wintry moonlight" through the word "sink" to the field and the imagined effect of dark cloud shapes breaking up its open surface. The speaker says that he can neither look up towards heaven nor down at the earth's multiplicity although each is beautiful because he cannot free himself from his burden of conscience. Far from turning his mind away from earthly vanities to thoughts of his eternal soul, his feeling of guilt is so great that it occupies him wholly and he can find no relief in either. His sense of responsibility for his actual or possible deeds and thoughts deadens his heart to beauty and goads either spiritual conscience or earthly vanity.

Section six presents three apparent rejections of the world from men in some state of power. The great lord of Chou surveys his dominions from the heights. The land is rich and everything is fresh and beautiful: the look of the meadows, the smell of the new-mown hay, the touch of the mountain snow. The conqueror, fresh from victory, has the greatest earthly power and wealth of his age within his grasp. Man has the power of creating that part of his experience which his imagination lights. From his dual nature, his heart which is both "blood-sodden" and the seat of his emotions, come the antinomies of day and night

as they relate to him. The word "gaudy" here is surprising enough in this context to bring vividly to mind the brightness and glitter, at the same time suggesting something which is artificial, and perhaps also the connotation of joy from the Latin root of the word and the physical resemblance to the bright bead, the Middle English "gaud".

Now the meaning of the line "Let all things pass away" becomes clear. All song means this, Yeats says. The artist, like the seigneur and the victor, at the point of completion and fulfilment wishes never to have to return to a lesser state. It is equivalent to Keats's wish "That I might drink and leave the world unseen" in the "Ode to a Nightingale" but without the sentimentality of the mere desire for escape from the pains of this world which accompanies the ecstasy and is specifically rejected in the Keats poem.

This aspiration to eternal ecstasy and the experience of blessedness of part four are clearly parallel to the yearning of the religious ascetic, or the voice of the soul, now named directly. Remorse and responsibility, which the soul would say are morally right, are the death of the heart. And, as they kill the heart from which springs those conflicts which man feels within himself and which promote the use of his imagination, they deny the singer his theme. The fire brings purification and salvation and unity with the divine, but the heart is by nature heterogeneous and sinful. "Original" takes both its senses in this context, indicating both the Fall which brought death to man and the sins which set in motion the Trojan war, for instance, and inspired the first great

singer. Conflict, between man and his god, man and man, man and the conditions of his life, is the theme of poetry.

The tone changes in the final section now that the doubt of the first section has been resolved through contrasting positions into an explicit and defined opposition. Although at first still reluctant to come to a final rejection of the soul's position, the increased confidence in the status and necessity of the artist's experience of joy results in a final affirmation of the role of the heart. The structure of the verse-form has also been modified through the condensed, allusive dialogue of part seven to a longer line more suited to a conversational tone, although the rhyme scheme is still regular, more so, in fact, than in some other parts of the poem, and there is a strong syntactical stylisation, both of which contribute towards preventing any feeling of looseness or casualness that could reduce the carefully balanced humour of this section to mere frivolity. The use of the conversational figure and the slightly dry speaking voice with its precise qualifying remarks are strongly reminiscent of T.S. Eliot, and the situation is noticeably similar to some he portrays, particularly in the combination of intellectuality and a regretful parting. The other figure is a real man here, but that is not vitally important since his views, as they bear on the poem, are made quite clear in the context. Both "Accept the miracles of the saints and honour sanctity" but the speaker cannot become a Christian because he feels he is "a singer born" and therefore cannot accept that life is important only as a preparation for the tomb.

There is another important difference, however. The poet accepts that St. Teresa's body is undecayed and gives off sweet, healing odours, but he follows this by speculating that she was preserved by the same process, and even by the same hands as were the Pharaohs. The first seems to suggest that he takes a very prosaic view of miracle and the second that he is also prepared to accept far more than Christianity would allow: reincarnation, perhaps, and a much broader, integrating conception of religion. Unsupported, this might appear whimsical and confused, but this stanza is as intricately patterned as the rest of the poem with a mosaic of word and image associations. In the tenth and eleventh lines the poet repeats the reference to Homer and then uses Holy Scripture against his opposition, quoting Samson's riddle of the lion and the honeycomb. "Out of the strong came forth sweetness" suggests a link with St. Teresa the ascetic, strong in faith, from whose tomb come sweet odours. These, and her healing powers as a saint seem "most welcome" in her tomb, and they are accepted in exactly the same way as were the curative properties of the Pharaoh's mummified remains in earlier periods, because their divinity had given them a resistance to bodily decay.

The paradox of physical eternity is peculiarly poignant in the case of St. Teresa,[1] who brought new

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1 Sections four and six of this poem are directly comparable to St. Teresa's descriptions of the fourth and third stages of prayer. The Life of St. Teresa of Avila, translated by David Lewis, chs. 16-20; see especially pp.123-4 and 108-9.

stringency to the religious life and whose writings concentrate on the progress of the soul towards perfect union with god. And this paradox plays against that other, reiterated in the last line, that the artist, despite his irredeemable worldliness, may also achieve a state of beatitude. The ironic parting with Von Hügel (and Eliot) is accomplished with the utmost lightness of tone, but the whole weight of the poem is behind this assertion that delight in life need not preclude the gift of blessedness or unity with the divine.

Like most of the other poems discussed here, "Vacillation" has proved attractive for source-hunting, and direct application of source material to the poem is frequent. Saul, for instance, explains who the Lord of Chou was, but does not explain his appearance in the poem.[1] Seiden notes that the tree is the Kabbalistic Tree of Life whose roots are in the earth and whose branches are in heaven,[2] but omits to add that in the poem the roots are said to be in man's heart, not in earth, and that the tree has specific meanings there which are not suggested by the description "Kabbalistic". As the discussion of the poem shows, no reference to Kabbalism is necessary, and in fact Seiden makes no further use of this reference. Arguing from the original draft, Saul suggests that the opposites wedded in the tree are ignorance and knowledge, but this, again, is only helpful if the particular kinds of ignorance and knowledge specified by the various sections of the poem are distinguished.

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1 Saul, p.144.

2 Seiden, p.295.

Application to the poem of A Vision and Yeats's letters and prose is common and sheds little enlightenment, occasionally even producing hopeless confusion, as in Seiden's comment that

> ...Yeats writes with a deliberate, often exaggerated, ambiguity about all or almost all of his mixed attitudes towards the supernatural. Since he is a man in whom the antithetical and primary tinctures are balanced, we are told in each of the poems [of "Vacillation"], he can and he cannot communicate with Anima Mundi through an exultation in nature; and so, he is and he is not capable of a mystical or visionary experience.[1]

Unterecker claims that the essay "Per Amica Silentia Lunae", which explains the two realities: the terrestrial and the condition of fire, is "the primary vast footnote that should be appended to 'Vacillation'",[2] but as Graham Hough says,[3] the language of the essay is obscure, and it is unnecessary to force it on to the poem, certainly as part of the primary understanding of the poem. Hough's own explanation of "Vacillation" IV is subtler, but still too bound to the ideas of A Vision to share the intelligibility in general terms which Yeats achieves in the poem. "Soul, having completed itself by assuming the mask, its complement, is liberated, and momentarily at least is out of the wheel", Hough explains. This is reasonable enough in its own terms but it leaves many specific suggestions of the poem out of account and so

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1 Seiden, p.290.

2 A Reader's Guide to W.B. Yeats, p.221.

3 The Last Romantics, 1961, p.253.

tends to obscure the internal relationships which give the whole poem its meaning. Thus, Hough goes on to suggest that "At this time Yeats is disposed to interpret the liberation in something very like Christian terms", which is quite untrue, as section eight shows.

This scruple may seem unfair to Hough, but his later discussion gives no clear indication of the position Yeats arrives at in this poem and his reasons for doing so, and this reluctance to admit Yeats's avowed agnosticism, shared by many critics, is associated with the most common misreadings of the poem. Yeats's recognition of those who "come Proud, open-eyed and laughing to the tomb" as a possible answer to the question of part one is emphasised and the final rejection of "What seems most welcome in the tomb" or the alternate joy obtainable through the artist's attitude towards life are understated or forgotten. Virginia Moore and V.K.N. Menon[1] say that Von Hügel is dismissed only because "he threw away the key of reincarnation". "Vacillation" III praises primary joy, Virginia Moore says, and the reference to the lion and the honeycomb means "out of the antithetical comes the primary". Even Homer is not anti-Christian because his theme is original sin:

> All that joyous heroism, what does it point up but man's fall from perfection and fight to regain it; the interest, ultimately, being <u>for the sake of the perfection</u>. So far, then, the poem...has said obliquely, 'The <u>antithetical</u> is, or serves, the <u>primary</u>, and directly or obliquely has praised <u>primary</u> joy. [In part III].[2] (Author's italics)

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[1] Moore, pp.345 and 406, Menon, p.69.

[2] Moore, p.405.

Few critics bend so far backwards as Virginia Moore to rescue Yeats from his consciously individual stand, but suggestion can go far to make him seem less unconventional. Thus A.G. Stock says that "At the end Yeats bids farewell to saintliness to live in the pride of his finite strength; but he never denies that beatitude is in surrender to the infinite, which can only be through humility".[1] If there is humility in the hanging of Attis's image, it is surely not of the Christian kind, and in part six the preliminary to "surrender to the infinite" is something more like pride: the sense of fulfilment after great effort. Even Richard Ellmann says that the poem "bows politely to orthodoxy - Von Hügel and annihilation", but section six is not only not orthodox, but, like the quotation from Judges xiv, uses orthodox religious writing to suggest an entirely different idea. St. Teresa's concrete, image-filled prose, to which many of Yeats's own images are allied, is particularly apt for Yeats's purpose of maintaining his own religion of life against the orthodoxy of death. St. Teresa herself became a poet in the third state of prayer because

> The soul in this state would have all men behold it, and know of its bliss, to the praise of God, and help it to praise him. It would have them be partakers of its joy; for its joy is greater than it can bear....The admirable spirit of David, the royal prophet, must have felt in the same way, so it seems to me, when he played on the harp, singing the praises of God.[2]

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1 Stock, p.206.

2 St. Teresa, p.109.

As Ellmann himself laboriously shows through quotations of similar passages in "Per Amica Silentia Lunae" and a letter, "the experience was physical as well as spiritual, a mixture characteristic of Yeats's brand of sanctity".[1] Such experiences are undoubtedly religious in nature, but to align them with Christianity is to deny Yeats's questioning of that religion and so also the point of the poem.[2]

Perhaps because their major points seem obvious, sections six and eight receive very little detailed attention. Like Ellman, Parkinson assumes that section six is a rejection of the world, and asserts that the poem is "a deliberate denial of the ecstatic role" in which the symbols of the tree and Attis are "in effect lampooned by the total poem".[3] Denis Donoghue says of the final section in relation to the whole poem:

> ...one lives with miracle, if a miracle comes; if not, one still lives. Joy is available if the attributes of Self can swell and overflow...and fill up all the hollows left by Soul; or if Soul, in loneliness, 'descends' into the mire of humanity.[4]

This muddle results partly from a casual attitude towards "Vacillation" and partly from an attempt to read The Winding Stair volume as a structure controlling the

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1 Ellman, Identity, p.270.

2 T.R. Whitaker agrees that Yeats's attitude is not a matter of sentimental reverence "as some critics' comments on 'Vacillation' imply", p.161.

3 Parkinson, The Later Poetry, pp.120-1.

4 Donoghue and Mulryne, p.114.

meanings of the individual poems, producing here an incongruous coalition of "Dialogue" and "Vacillation". Equally vague is Donoghue's statement that section six presents an answer to mutability adopted "because this is a dignified stance". Ellmann, Stauffer and Kleinstück[1] all describe section six as exemplifying a "weariness" with the world, and the latter, arguing that a cyclical view of the universe may lead to the feeling that everything is worthless and meaningless, compares this section to some lines from Macbeth (V.v.49-50), "I 'gin to be a-weary of the sun, And wish the'estate o'the world were now undone". Ellmann is more discerning than this, but nevertheless the word "weariness" suggests a denial of the world rather than the exultation in the world and in worldly power leading to a transcendence of the earthly state suggested by the context. The third stanza of this section is particularly hard to fit to this explanation, and would have to be interpreted as meaning that song is a weariness, a very ninetyish conception. Unterecker suggests that since the tree is rooted in man's heart, "song is as mortal as its maker, who must finally assert: Let all things, even song itself, pass away".[2] This is ingenious but does not explain why "Let all things pass away" is said to be the "meaning" of all song, and is equally false to the tone of these stanzas. Acceptance of such interpretations leaves the conclusion without sustained imaginative support in the rest of the poem and this, more than any intellectual reason, probably explains the lack of conviction these critics feel in Yeats's rejection of Christianity.

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1 Ellmann, p.274, Stauffer, p.90, Maxwell and Bushrui, p.13.

2 Unterecker, pp.221-2.

Supernatural Songs

This group of twelve poems is the most outstanding example of Yeats's method of controlling meaning by the use of a multitude of echoes, parallelisms and contrasts of idea and image forming an intricate mosaic. Some of the themes or image-patterns which appear in the poem are:- light and darkness or blindness, knowledge and ignorance, speech and sound, illusion and reality, consummation and disjunction, unity and multiplicity, hatred and desire, love and war, body and soul, ascetic and lover, repetition, opposition and circularity. The method is therefore not simply a tour-de-force, but arises from and complements the thematic structure.

The first poem of the group opens with the strikingly odd situation of the very old man, evidently a monk or a hermit, apparently reading in the dark. The poet makes use of this to bring the reader into the action of the poem by beginning with Ribh's comment on the reader's supposed surprise and going on to propose that he should be the bearer of Ribh's "tale" to others. Ribh is humorously aware of his own seeming absurdity but his manner in telling his tale is dignified and ceremonious and by the end of the first stanza it is clear that he does not regard his teaching lightly.

The tale begins with Baile and Aillinn who, it is gradually revealed, suffered for their love and died, becoming angels who now come together again on the anniversary of their death. Enough is given of the story for the reader to understand their importance to this poem. Although the tale is the subject of an early poem by Yeats, the differences between the two poems are as illuminating

as the extra information gained about Baile and Aillinn by following this allusion. In the earlier poem the lovers were turned into swans, but the figure is not developed and their eternal love is told in terms of other images which by implication eventually return them to human form. Here there is no such vague and airy paradise. They are "transfigured to pure substance" but retain their human form and are conjoined above their grave. Their representative trees, separate in the earlier poem, now grow together over their grave, forming a symbol of their love much more forcible and natural than the tablets of yew and apple wood on which their story was written in the earlier version. The change is given credence by being assumed: "All know their tale,...What juncture of the apple and the yew, Surmount their bones". This, together with the ensuing explanation of the story makes the earlier poem virtually unnecessary as an allusion. The tale is re-created here, altered where necessary, so that this poem is not dependent on the other. At this point it would hardly matter if Baile and Aillinn had been invented for the poem, but the fact that they are a part of Irish folklore adds an overtone to the themes of reality and illusion and the nature of knowledge which develop in the poem.

Apple and yew suggest Eve's apple from the tree of knowledge and death, respectively, and are appropriately female and male in suggestion; as also, perhaps, are leaf and twig - foliage and support - but these do more to create the particularity of the setting. "Junction" and "surmount" are noticeable for their precise, formal quality. In the context, "surmount" may mean that the earthly part of the lovers, their bones, are overcome by

the Fall and death. But there is a positive aspect relating to the paradox of "The miracle that gave them such a death", which suggests that the flourishing of the united trees on the grave is a victory over death.

These lovers have been given what all lovers desire, complete interfusion of substance. The association of angels and light provides a common basis for the image and there seems no necessity to associate it with Swedenborg,[1] despite the novelty of the image, since it is thoroughly consonant with its setting. It is appropriate that, rather than the mechanical pressures and tensions of physical love, this meeting of "pure substances" should be a reaction of subtler forces, burning and giving off light like a chemical or electrical reaction. This disarming practicality is repeated in the last lines, where the light "Though somewhat broken by the leaves,...Lies in a circle on the grass" like a reading lamp. But there is a purpose in this seeming pedantry. The particularity makes the scene convincingly ordinary and realistic, the humour makes the fantasy more acceptable, and the details contribute to the pattern of symbol and metaphor. The leaves which break the angelic light are things of the earth, suggesting that Ribh's reception of the light, and hence his ability to read and understand his holy book, are impeded by the fact that he is on earth. The circle of light on the grass is reminiscent of an enchanted or magic circle from which contact was made with the spirit world.

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[1] The continuity between earthly and heavenly love is established in the poem and it is the similarity that calls up the reminiscences of Swedenborg, who serves as a precedent.

The witty contrast between matter of fact and the supernatural appears again in the irony that "Those lovers...Hurry into each other's arms" while Ribh studies in their light. In heaven they enjoy the sexual intercourse usually thought of as peculiarly physical, while he, on earth, must live ascetically and pray. But there is a parallel within the contrast. Their suffering on earth gave them spiritual bliss, as Ribh's austerity and hardship fits him for spiritual knowledge on earth.

The second section seems at first a complete change of subject, but it soon appears that the theme is continuous. Supernatural stories, like that of Baile and Aillinn's spiritual consummation, demand a sexual union of male and female elements, not an unnatural "abstraction" like the male Christian Trinity. (The presence of Patrick in the title seems to be simply a continuation of the fiction of reality of Ribh as a presumably Irish monk or hermit). Ribh has learnt from his holy book that "things below are copies" and that "Natural and supernatural with the self-same ring are wed", and we recall that Baile and Aillinn are wed in their ring of light. Ribh, it seems, is a Hermetist or Gnostic of some kind, but once again, it is far less important to take the "Great Smaragdine Tablet" as an allusion to the teachings of Hermes Trismegistus than to understand what the poem says about them. The reference to the Hermetic tradition sets Ribh's remarks in a context but that part of the tradition which is relevant to the poem appears in it. The tablet's doctrine is similar enough to the Platonic doctrine of forms to make it familiar, and the disagreement about the nature of the Trinity, also part of the Gnostic tradition, is given imaginative force by the illustration provided by

section one. The allusion is in any case too broad to be taken as more than an indication of the background and nature of Ribh's discourse. The "Great Smaragdine Tablet" need only be recognised as the God-given law tablet of an ancient religion, the old word for emerald adding the richness and impressiveness of the exotic to the suggestion of supernatural authority.

Man, beast and Godhead, like Baile and Aillinn, "all must copy copies, all increase their kind", but in lower natures the conflagration is "damped by the body or the mind", and even angels, apparently, are only fused momentarily. The next phrase is trebly ambiguous. "Juggling" may be a substantive object; "nature" may be the totality of the "natural" or a mode of being or a characteristic or mood; and "mounts" may mean "climbs on top of" or "increases, rises to a higher level of power or intensity" or "mounts sexually". The following phrase, "her coil in their embraces twined" makes it clear that nature is here thought of as a snake, but this does not necessarily limit the suggestions to the physical. The previous phrase may mean: (i) nature mounts that juggling; (ii) that guileful nature mounts - joins in their consummation; (iii) that subtle, equivocating mode of being increases. The word "mounts" also calls to mind the trees which "surmount" Baile and Aillinn's bones. This multivalency is clearly no accident since the next stanza says that "The mirror-scaled serpent is multiplicity". The mirror scales of the serpent reflect the light of human consummation in many directions, and the image of the lovers which the scales give is fragmentary. Failure of love, the stanza explains, means that they can only imperfectly and partially reproduce themselves.

The numerical legerdemain of the final stanza has an important application to the concept of a Trinity, as has its counterpart in the Hermetic mystery religion. The "magic" represents the central mystery. Ribh does not deny the Trinity, but insists only that spiritual and material love and reproduction are not entirely dissimilar, as Christianity suggests, but are essentially the same. This is reiterated in the third section. The Godhead is at once male and female. It contains the opposites and unites them. The first lines of this poem also make explicit that this act <u>is</u> a mystery. Despite the fact that Ribh wants his tale carried aborad, it does not matter that the hearer did not understand him when he took part in the mystery. In his ecstasy he spoke in broken sentences, being an imperfect instrument of transmission for the mystery, just as his reception of the light was imperfect. But Ribh was, after all, able to share the ecstasy of Baile and Aillinn. His soul has been joined in spiritual union with its own cause or ground, and it is implied that the soul, in union, is the female principle of the Godhead.

"Some shadow fell" may imply either that something resulted from the consummation, or that something came between Ribh and the light, or both: that something resulted from the union that was not spiritual. The analogy with the leaves of section one suggests that the shadow is connected with his soul, or its new birth, being resumed into his body. His soul forgets the creative passion and returns from the circle of unearthly light to the "common round of day". The contrast of "amorous cries" and "quiet" calls attention again to the combination of asceticism and sexuality: the cries come

out of the quiet night and out of meditation and "solitary prayer".

The four images of the next poem, "There", each represent some kind of unity, the active verbs presenting the achieving of unity as an image. The barrel hoops are brought into place, sealing the separate staves into a single form. The serpents bite their tails, each forming a closed ring, suggesting the act of self-completion. The serpent with its tail in its mouth is an ancient symbol of wisdom, representing the mind ultimately understanding itself. In the context it also suggests the serpent of multiplicity achieving a state of unity. The third image says that There all the cycles, spirals and circling of the universe converge, like the coils of the serpent of nature coming together into a single circle. The culminating image shows the reduction of motion to stability and diversity to unity as the planets "drop" into the sun under gravity as the circling movement ceases. The Sun, capitalised, is the last word of the stanza and the climax of the series of images, and suggests Plato's equation of the sun with the final good, and the perfection of wisdom of the Godhead. Yeats's use of the word "There" parallels Plotinus's but the reference need not be noticed since its meaning is perfectly clear in the poem.

"Ribh considers Christian Love insufficient" once again presents a seeming reversal which is gradually revealed to be in essential agreement with earlier statements. Ribh appears to reject love, which he has previously posited as the fundamental creative force, and claims instead to study hatred. But the title gives the

clue to the nature of his rejection. Christian love is insufficient, Ribh suggests, for two reasons. Love "is of God and passes human wit" and therefore man cannot reproduce God's love as Christianity urges. Secondly, Christianity, like other religious systems, is a way of understanding the supernatural which has been developed by man, and in order to achieve union with the Godhead the soul must reject all human thought and concentrate only on God. Ribh dissented from the Christian Trinity because it was an abstraction, not representing the truth symbolically apparent in nature. Now he is more radical, rejecting all human thought as a mere covering, superficially bright, of the truth. The soul as bride must approach God in nakedness before consummation can occur.

Hatred, Ribh says, is "a light my jealous soul has sent", a "darker knowledge" in contrast to the light from direct apprehension of supernatural love. The soul can only learn from experience of intercourse with the supernatural, and this, the last line implies, is the true birth of the soul, the rebirth into spiritual knowledge. But the "dark night of the soul" must come before union can occur. Hatred is a sweeping clean, a catharsis of the soul as it turns away from every human construct. Terror and deception, it is suggested, are associated with human thought, being ways in which man may react to his condition of life. Only when it is free from them can the soul discover the crippling impurities within itself and return to its unfallen state. ("Walks" here introduces a poignant reminiscence of God walking the earth among the trees). Only then is the soul fit to "turn away from every thought of God mankind has had". Ribh's rejection of Christianity is therefore no superficial disagreement.

After the ecstatic climax of section five, section six presents another striking change, not a reversal although it may appear so, but a development of previous ideas. The feminine moon, like the soul, approaches the sun, from which she gains her light by reflection. But she cannot stay with him because "His light had struck me blind Dared I stop". The soul, it is implied, cannot remain long in union with God, and does not desire it. She rejoices in her own individuality: "The greater grows my light The further that I fly", despite the fact that she must return to the source. The living soul does not walk in purity to God but "sidles up" fearfully and "trips" away with evident relief. And the result is a cyclic movement toward and away from God, like the moon's movements with respect to the earth and sun.

The clarity, purity and simplicity of the soul's song "I am I, am I", reminiscent of the music of the spheres or Plato's whorls on the spindle of necessity, is exquisitely appropriate to the moon's clear self-statement against the night sky. "All creation shivers With that sweet cry" is ambiguous, like the soul's attitude towards God. "Shivers" can suggest either fear or ecstasy; but it may also mean "shivers to pieces", and this calls to mind the mirror-scaled serpent. Nature's, or creation's, mirror of the world above is shattered into fragments by the soul's love for its own human life.

In section seven Ribh returns from his ecstasy to his physical being. He attempts to retain his feminine experience as soul, in an effort to keep his sense of having given birth to his renewed soul or his new understanding, but the very effort of restraining his will

from disturbing the precious vision, all but bringing about his own death, forces him back into sensual awareness and thus into his own body. The foliage (as in section one) again enters to obscure his vision, and as his sight adjusts to the earth he sees his body. At the same time he becomes conscious of the feel of his body, which is as if it were being caressed with smooth, sensuous muscularity by an animal's tongue. He feels the luxurious physicality of fulfilment, and as he does so the garden foliage thickens to a forest, his physical body growing denser around his soul. His pulse sounds in his ears like a primitive drum-beat emerging from the forest of his body. The reborn man is "baptized" into animal life by the beast, marking the child as the offspring not only of the soul's spiritual union but also of physical nature. This flat paraphrase does not convey the real suggestion of primordial magic in the poem. The unanswered questions echo the mysteries of sections two and three and the impersonal viewpoint allows the enactment of the state of combined femininity and masculinity, presenting this most difficult conception immediately as a suggestive enigma which draws the mind into active relationship.

The next poem develops the statement of section six that man as an individual, far from gaining knowledge and seeing the "show" in union with God, is struck blind in his presence. Human beings partake of eternity in their passion, their copying of the act of love in their desire for self-completion fusing them with the Godhead. At that time they are no longer individuals with free will, being taken over by some force beyond them in whose hands they are like characters in a play - the Master is making the

show. Just as Ribh could not control what he said while in ecstasy, "A passion-driven exultant man sings out Sentences that he has never thought". The lovers have knowledge of the soul's union but as men and women they have no understanding of the experience.

The capital on "Flagellant" suggests not only that he is one of the Flagellant Brotherhood but also that he is one of the Dramatis Personae. Although he is the reverse of the lover in his attempt to subjugate the body entirely in his desire for spiritual purity, the very act of lashing brings him to an ecstasy of pain. All union is sexual, even the extreme ascetic comes to a sexual union, his "submissive loins" female to the lash. He also is driven to his consummation without his conscious understanding, the necessary opposing force arising in his own body as it acts under the control of the bisexual principle in the Godhead. And this control extends over all of human life, from the single person to whole empires. "The hand and lash that beat down frigid Rome" suggests the flogging of Roman women at the feast of the Lupercalia, one of many ancient magical rites involving flogging, which was intended to make them fertile. Since this is paralleled with the example of the Flagellant the process is by implication the same. The last two lines modify the area of reference suggested by "frigid Rome". The early Christian church rejected world and body, but it too was "raped" by the unadmitted need for its opposite.

Another "literal symbol", the significance of the reference to "world-transforming Charlemagne" must also be determined from the context. He was "world-transforming" in several ways. He united an area of Europe larger,

Alcuin said, than the first Roman empire; he encouraged learning in the middle of the dark ages and ensured its continuation; and, although no ascetic, he was a devout Christian who supported the church and fought and conquered in the name of Christianity. Eventually he was crowned by the Pope as emperor, creating the idea of the Holy Roman Empire. Charlemagne was "God's second sword", the fighting arm, so to speak, of the church.

The significance of Charlemagne's relationship to the world and to Christianity appears in the following poems. "The Four Ages of Man" takes up the theme of war and shows how all of human life is a struggle of some kind. In childhood the body takes all the strength in control and growth. Here, in contrast to section five, the body walks upright, implying that it is as pure as was the unfallen soul. The young man's discovery of the needs of the self and of the body for others, the discovery of love, destroys the innocence and peace of the child. After heart has had its dominance the battle shifts to the mind, and finally man must face death and the loss of his individuality. The "stroke of midnight" is applicable to both transitory and final death, but the final death of the body is suggested more strongly here by the title and the progression of the couplets. "Conjunctions" repeats this double implication in the connotations of Saturn of both wisdom and old age. The first couplet suggests that if the wisdom of old age is joined to strength and power a miraculous harvest of human creativeness will result. Also, that if man can unite body and mind he may achieve a renewed fertility. The second repeats the assertions of section eight and of the first sections of the poem in a miracle of compression made possible by the parallel with

the astrological associations of the first couplet and the title. Mars and Venus are held in balance with Christian love and militancy. The sword in reverse is a cross. Christ died on the cross for the love of man in the battle against death and sin. The cross is a sacred burden of duty as were Charlemagne's wars. The austerity of the first line is set against the sensual suggestiveness of the second, which shows the pagan god of war and goddess of love united. War is thus related to each kind of love, spiritual and bodily, Christian and pagan. And the combination of these two couplets summarises the situation of Ribh, the wise old man, presenting his knowledge of the unity in polarity of natural and supernatural.

Poem eleven, "A Needle's Eye", also refocusses earlier ideas. In many ways the opposite of the fourth poem, "There", it shows the life cycle in motion. "Roaring" suggests both the hurly-burly of the life of the senses and the vast size of the stream. The contrast with the minute source of the stream stresses the paradox that everything comes from nothing and repeats the antithesis of multiplicity and unity. It is also another use of practical fact to support with familiarity the insubstantial and less familiar image: the narrow birth-place acts like a constriction in a tube, increasing the pressure on the stream and forcing it forward. The ceaseless stream of life is "goaded" on like a noisy drove of animals by its own inevitability since it is part of a cycle in which the dead things must return. The soul cannot remain long with God.

But man is not merely an animal herded forward by the pattern of life and death. "Meru" shows him to be driven

by his own mind, a mad animal "Ravening, raging, and uprooting" in his desperate search for the truth about his own existence. Like his moments of spiritual unity, man's efforts to live in harmony are destroyed by the necessities of his nature. Civilisation is a seeming unity, held together by representations of the truth which must collapse before the onslaught of thought because they can never be the truth. Man cannot escape the terror and deception of life simply by abandoning himself to God, just as he cannot escape sexuality in passion by attempting to deny the body, because thought is his nature, not his garment.

Knowledge, the goal of thought, is nakedness, darkness and suffering, not light and ecstasy. The hermits on the sacred mountain who reach as near to heaven as earth will allow are either "caverned in night under the drifted snow, Or where that snow and winter's dreadful blast Beat down upon their naked bodies". When free they are exposed and defenceless before the fierce elements, when secure they are imprisoned. Understanding brings either dissatisfaction with accepted ideas or uncertainty before all ideas. The only certain knowledge is the certainty of defeat. The poem has showed that the momentary bliss of union is possible, when man without his conscious knowledge shares eternity. God can love only and retain his unity, but man's nature is fragmentary, he is disunited in all his parts, and desire and hatred, love and war, are equal partners in his make-up. His desire for unity creates noble structures but his individual consciousness tears them down again. Knowledge of God is eternity, but knowledge of life is perpetual flux.

Among the major poems of the late period, "Supernatural Songs" has received probably the least satisfactory treatment. Much of the critical comment is devoted to providing sources and explanations from external references. Jeffares is only more explicit than the norm when he states that the meaning of "Conjunctions" must be sought from the correspondence, "when an apparently meaningless poem becomes clear".[1] In fact, the poem becomes anything but clear when it is seen as the two sets of qualities Yeats hoped to find in his children: the daughter democratic, Christian and objective in temperament, represented by Mars and Venus, and the son aristocratic, pagan and subjective, represented by Jupiter and Saturn. These associations of the symbols may be appropriate in Yeats's private correspondence but they do not accord with the poem in its context. Similarly, "The Four Ages of Man" is not illuminated by Yeats's comments in a letter linking it with the four elements and four periods of history as Jeffares, Saul, Unterecker and Ellmann imply.[2] In the poetry the associations are limited by being placed in a consistent whole of meaning, and in general Yeats makes use of only the most well-known and obvious associations there. The elements do not appear as part of the poem's imagery, and, although the movement of history is paralleled to the life of man in the total poem, in section ten there is no suggestion of

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1 Jeffares, p.284.

2 Jeffares, p.283, Saul, p.159, Unterecker, Reader's Guide, pp.250-1, Ellmann, pp.35-6.

the elaborate detail given in the letter, as Whitaker[1] recognises when he relegates the reference to his Notes.

Whitaker's interpretation certainly looks for a consistent meaning in the poem but his concentration on Yeats's "dialogue with history" and his reliance on external sources to confirm or explain many of his points leads him to alter the poem to fit his own conception. Noting that Ribh reverses the ancient symbol of escape from "the lunar wheel of history into the sun itself", Whitaker argues that he does so because, although as saint Ribh imaginatively transcends life, as poet "his home is in the serpent's mouth". To demonstrate this, Whitaker deals with the latter parts of the poem before parts four and five, and concludes with part seven. In this, Ribh

> ...becomes the vehicle of "primordial Motherhood" ...through a willing suspension of desire, an acceptance of limitation and a consequent opening to the forces beyond.[2]

But in the poem the child is already present when "He holds him from desire, all but stops his breathing", and this gives the clue to the nature of the physical and mental state recorded there, which Whitaker apparently does not recognise. Although it is true that Ribh has had to practise austerity and acquire much learning to achieve this union and rebirth into knowledge, this is not the final statement of the poem and it is not, as Whitaker implies, the only reason why Ribh reverses the process of escape from the wheel. In "Vacillation" the rejection of

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1 Whitaker, pp.116 and 314.

2 Ibid., p.119.

Christianity is made personal to the poet and yet the poem has more conviction than a mere personal statement because it has imaginative validity and coherence. The personal element contributes to these effects both in particularity and through the representativeness of the poet. Ribh stands in a similar relationship to this poem. He focusses and demonstrates the poem's meaning but his achievement of gnosis is not the whole. The poem ends with the stark statement of "Meru", which is not, surely, seen as a place of escape from life, despite anything Yeats may have said elsewhere,[1] but a place from which life is observed. The nature and conditions of man's knowledge and his life is the substance of Ribh's wisdom, and this, not the mere fact of his creativeness, is the poem's culmination.

Most critics do take the group of poems as a connected series, if only because of Ribh's explicit presence in four of them, but their readings show the familiar lack of acceptance of the notion of a completed meaning and this prevents them from seeing the symbols in their full contexts. Where the poems are taken separately, as in Henn's examination of the first poem and Ure's treatment of the first four,[2] the poems are found to be unsatisfactory, Henn finding the first too rich in suggestion for the meaning it gives and Ure seeing the series of four as an ornamental structure lacking in

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1 One could "find some cavern upon Meru, and so pass out of all life", E. & I., p.469, quoted by Whitaker, p.116.

2 Henn, p.317, Ure, "Yeats's Supernatural Songs", Review of English Studies, n.s. VII (1956), pp.38-51.

humanity, thus supporting the proposition that these group-poems are integrated into broad patterns of meaning and gain from being treated as wholes.

The Gyres

The cry of "The Gyres!" in the first line is explained gradually as the poem progresses, but the first stanza makes it clear that it refers to the mutability of everything on earth. Beauty, thought and value are not permanent but contain within them their own dissolution, just as human beings, as they live, are also moving towards death. The phrase "ancient lineaments" has several possible associations: ancestral features; markings on the face of the earth - towns, roads, mountains etc.; ancient ideas or cultures. All of these are probably appropriate: human characteristics, ideals and actualities, the whole "face" of human life, change with time. The cyclic movement of the gyres is linked with the theory of perpetual alternation of concord and discord of Empedocles. The world passes from a state of complete aggregation to the opposite state of complete disintegration as either love or strife predominates. Discord he compares to a vortex in which everything is wildly hurled about. The poem implies, therefore, that discord is now prevailing. The word "unfashionable" in the last line of the poem also makes it clear that this is a new phenomenon, the reversal of the previous age.

The invocation of the first line is addressed to "Old Rocky Face". The term has the tone of awed disrespect of a nickname, resulting from man's natural reaction of mockery at his own fear. "Rocky Face" suggests a face cut

in rock or that appears to be made of rock, with strong lines and a hard aspect, a face inscrutable and changeless, without the pliancy of expression of human faces. Thus two principles are opposed in the first line, the gyres of constant change and the timeless face, inhuman and yet with human configuration. But "Rocky Face" is called upon to "look forth", implying that he has withdrawn from among men in the past age but that his appearance is in accord with the period now coming. Allusions may be present to a sphinx or other rock-cut face, or to the Delphic oracle, or to the reference to Dante in "Ego Dominus Tuus", who is associated with a stony face, but these suggestions are not confirmed by the first stanza.

The hint of defiant laughter in the name appears again at the end of the stanza following the line which makes the fall of Troy and of her greatest hero symbols of the present havoc. Taken together, these lines suggest another relevance for Troy. In art we can contemplate the inevitability of destruction without being involved in the suffering. We look on unmoved, but with a sense of exultation in the surge of life under affliction and the courage of man's response. The speaker, like the spectator of art and "Rocky Face", is an impassive witness of tragedy.

His impassivity is not easily achieved, though. Repeatedly the images of nightmare, pain and loss arise, and each time he restates his indifference forcefully until he receives an affirmation from the rock. This voice from a mouth-like cavern seems appropriate to "Rocky Face", but it is just possible that the two are not connected. This hints more strongly at something like the

Delphic oracle but, again, the idea of an oracle seems more important than the particular reference. That this stanza does represent a process of self-conviction is supported by the repetition of points from the first stanza and by the personal nature of the comment. The chaos and pain of the first two lines is much more immediate, physically and visually, than the equivalent statement in the first stanza. Here it is the body, not the earth, which is defiled by the upheaval of man and earth, and the idea of feeling is emphasised by the contrast of "numb nightmare" and "sensitive body". The mind is appalled by the apocalyptic vision, made more vivid by the recollection of Medieval pictures of death riding triumphant, but the senses are sharpened by disgust. The general statements about civilisations and values are here particularised and made personal in the "painted forms or boxes of make-up In ancient tombs" whose loss the speaker has lamented, tantalising glimpses of the "ancient lineaments" of "A greater, a more gracious time". All this must be accepted in every detail before the speaker can obey the command to "Rejoice!"

This struggle for personal conviction introduces the possibility that "Rocky Face" may be some desired characteristic of the speaker himself, but the association with art and the nature of the first address argue against this as a total reading, although it is almost certainly one facet of the whole. The parallel with Dante who "fashioned from his opposite An image that might have been a stony face"[1] is clear and suggests that the image the

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1 C.P., p.181.

speaker calls upon here may be an image of art, but it is an image grander in conception than the "dissipation and dream" of the earlier poem, one matched there only by Dante's chisel "set...to the hardest stone".

The third stanza plunges us once more into the full painful sense of the age, now shown as the degraded opposite of tragic heroism and civilisation. It is revealed that "Rocky Face" has been called upon because his standards are those which complement the irrational violence of the age. Those he holds dear are "Lovers of horses and of women" like the Trojans, and under his gaze these men, the speaker prophesies, will resurrect the ideas and values of the ancient civilisations. They will "disinter" the workman, noble and saint either by taking their inspiration from the sculptures and "painted forms" of the tombs, or the ideas may come from some unknown and mysterious source. The "dark betwixt the polecat and the owl" suggests the night inhabited by violent, fear-inspiring and superstition-breeding creatures, but also, as the owl is particularly associated with wisdom and the polecat with fierceness and cruelty, suggests that the new conceptions will spring from the tension between the two. Finally, "Or any rich, dark nothing" suggests a possible source in the contemplation of death or the infinite.

"Rocky Face" is therefore the proper image of art in an aristocratic and religious age, looking steadfastly at the fated destruction with his dispassionate gaze and transfiguring it with his terrible joy into tragedy. Clearly the whole depends on the determinism of the cycles, and, probably for that reason, they appear at the end and the beginning of the poem. But the conviction of the poem does not rest on them alone. The element of fatalism in

tragedy is commonly accepted and the anarchy of the age is strongly presented. The fatality of life and values is also shown. Nevertheless, the poem runs the danger of being accused of sheer inhumanity through the interpretation of the repeated "What matter?" not as an attempt to subdue feeling but as evidence of lack of feeling. To avoid this, the emotion must be seen to be controlled, and although this is achieved in the images which show the condition of the world, it is less certain in those which deal with the regret for lost culture. The image of "painted forms or boxes of make-up In ancient tombs" continues the linkage of the themes of man's image of himself and the resurrection of that image from the past, but it is clever rather than imaginatively convincing. The particular details are given no individual life and are not supported by the generalised statement of the themes in the first stanza. And although the generality of the whole poem is in accord with the nature of its vatic statement, it suffers from the incomplete realisation of the speaker's personality and the consequent uncertainty of his demonstration of its meaning in himself.

The doubt and confusion surrounding this poem stems mainly from the enigmatic character of "Rocky Face" and the relation between the determinism of the gyres and the speaker's attitude discussed above. "Rocky Face" has been variously named as the sphinx, the Delphic oracle, the beast of "The Second Coming", Ben Bulben, Shelley's Ahasuerus, a stone head on Thoor Ballylee, and the moon. The more interesting interpretations are related to the second problem. Several critics do assume that "at the opening of the poem the poet is reborn as an invulnerable

stony face", giving him "liberation from the pressures of transitoriness".[1] The acceptance of the determinism of the gyres then becomes dangerously like a mere withdrawal and an ambiguity appears between this and the hope at their implications in the final stanza.[2] Perhaps the least understood element in the poem, the poet's assertion of tragic joy stands between the acceptance and the hope. None of the critics discovers any elements which associate the tragic joy with the hope in the last stanza. Instead, the poem is paraphrased:

> Tis well an old age is out
> And time to begin a new.[3]

Or else the joy is explained as "exultation in the destructive element", or as "the joy in the heart of emptiness".[4] "Tragic" seems to be conceived of in an almost Medieval sense as the confrontation of man with the mutability of life.

Pointing out the similarities between this poem and "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" and the second of "Two Songs From a Play", Rajan says that their strong involvement and imaginative richness complete the bare statement of "The Gyres" and without them its tragic joy "could legitimately be resisted as inhuman".[5] Certainly

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[1] Mulryne, pp.126, 128; also Stock, p.22, Stauffer, p.45, Rajan, pp.175-6, Henn, p.320.

[2] As Graham Martin comments, "The Later Poetry of W.B. Yeats", Penguin Guide, vol. 7, p.183. He includes "The Statues" in this comment also.

[3] Stauffer, p.45. Henn also assumes this, p.320.

[4] Rajan, p.177, Stock, p.223.

[5] Rajan, p.175.

these similarities encourage comparison with the earlier poems, and it is noticeable that each is a complex blend of positive and negative elements. In "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" one might point to the values which are mocked but not denied and to the beauty and interest which the poet manages to find in the final vision, and in the "Song" to the last two lines, just as an indication of the kinds of attitudes which might be anticipated by comparison in "The Gyres". Nevertheless these poems are not essential to the meaning of the later poem, even if they add flesh to some of its statements. There, the bare directness contributes both to the incantatory weight, as Rajan notes, and to the illustration of the nature of that tragic joy.

Rajan is apparently diverted from this poem by its kinship to others. Vivienne Koch is influenced mainly by her knowledge of Yeats's prose. Miss Koch sees the poem as an internal dialogue between the poet's antithetical self and Rocky Face (his primary self), and also between his intellect and his intuition (the voice from the cavern). She suggests that "Rejoice!" is the command of his intuition, to which the intellect, which has denied his emotion for the "painted forms or boxes of make-up", capitulates. Yeats is abandoning personal responsibility for making a reality of his conception of "a more gracious time" and relies instead on the gyres to do it for him, Miss Koch argues. In the last stanza he hails the coming of Unity of Being, and Miss Koch uses this to justify the poem because this concept can be made respectable by

comparing it with "integration of personality", "even if we do not admire the features which Yeats assigns to it".[1]

The unlikelihood that Unity of Being will result from a surrender to intuition and to necessity is clear to Miss Koch, yet she does not hesitate to attribute this suggestion to Yeats. In fact Unity of Being is neither mentioned in the poem nor alluded to. The last stanza says only that certain ideas will emerge from the discord of the age because men with the capacity to face the chaos will turn to ideas like those of a past age in their endeavours to understand their own condition. The introduction of the concept of Unity of Being is partly brought about by relating the poem to the prose and partly induced by the over-simplified application of the internal dialogue theory in the earlier stanzas. Undoubtedly the poet is seeking some answering condition within himself, but the association with art is equally obvious. Miss Koch notes the echo of "Ego Dominus Tuus" in "Rocky Face" but is more concerned to justify her introduction of the doctrine of the mask than to study the suggestions of the name and the ideas it is related to.

This concentration on the opposing sides of a single personality causes the "dialogue" to appear purely internal, which Miss Koch translates as psychologically internal. Yet the poem is personal in tone only in the middle of the second stanza, and the following lines return to the deliberate impersonality that characterises the broader vision of the first and last stanzas.

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1 Koch, p.110.

Moreover, Miss Koch does not explain why the poet abandons himself to an intuitive response which is the opposite of his previous emotional response. It is not satisfactory to dub this "intuition" and therefore arbitrary. Even the gyres are not arbitrary in this sense, but exist because "Things thought too long can be no longer thought,...". The calculated intransigence of the command and of the repeated "What matter?" are obviously linked with "Rocky Face"; yet he is called upon deliberately by the speaker. He is thus consciously attempting to overcome his emotional regression away from the present and into the past, and this in turn implies that "Rejoice!" is not arbitrary but willed, and is associated with facing the present, not abdicating from responsibility.

The Statues

In this poem the stanzas are linked by a series of statue-images and by a development in time. They fall into an uneven chronological sequence roughly as follows:-

(i) the time in which Pythagoras's theories came into public knowledge;

(ii) classical Greece, the time of the defeat of the Persians at Salamis;

(iii) spans the development of a new line of thought, opposed to Greek humanism, with Buddhism in the east and Christianity in Europe;

(iv) this century, the Irish uprising, set against England as representing the modern industrial age.

The major conceptual relationship between the stanzas is clearly not based on either a temporal or a geographical

sequence. The key to the mode of development must therefore be sought through the function of the symbols in their contexts.

In stanza one the statues are first referred to as "numbers", and it is only gradually and indirectly revealed that they are statues, gathering a sense of mystery about them for the reader as for the people to whom they are revealed. They are the result of a theory which has fused "number" and art and evidently this is to be thought of as a new development ("the people stare"). Pythagoras's philosophy, which might more appropriately be called a religion, sprang from a conviction that there was a fundamental unity in all life and that union or approach towards the Godhead was to be sought through a kind of intellectual mysticism. His statues, it is implied, were based on an intellectual contemplation and reconstruction of the human form, their measurements being representative of the mathematical unity underlying the natural universe and allying it to the divine. This new relationship of man to his world was given form as an abstraction of the natural man, a static representation of the temporal.

These synthetic human beings are said to lack character, but the boys and girls seeking sexual, and perhaps self-, knowledge recognise in the perfection of outward appearance the coherence of matter and idea. They are instinctively aware that the statues do not need to possess "character" in themselves because they can act as a human ideal and the focus for undirected passionate energy. But although they have some essence of humanity in their outward appearance the statues remain non-human. The arrangement of the syntax in the last two lines of the

stanza stresses the conjunction of "live lips" and "plummet-measured face". This is surely the true realisation of Pythagoras's plan - the acceptance of his abstraction from the living world as an archetype by the most fully alive of human beings.

In stanza two the poet begins by contradicting himself forcefully, the effect being to give a sharp sense of the magnitude of the Greek sculptors' achievement. Once again he demonstrates the apparent contradictions that are reconciled within the statues, but now he adds the massive hardness implied by mallet and chisel and the softness of "casual flesh", contrasting also the effort which has gone into their making and the resulting casual appearance (where "casual" has the meaning "undesigned" and hence "natural", and also, perhaps, in conjunction with "flesh", "temporary"). They also are calculations, but they appear less abstract than the earlier statues.

By their achievement the sculptors "put down All Asiatic vague immensities". "Put down" gives possible meanings of "express" or "give form to" (put down on paper) and "suppress". This suggests that they defeated by giving form to them "All Asiatic vague immensities". The latter phrase is broadly suggestive in this context of ideas in which man figures as a speck in the infinity of the universe. The "banks of oars" in the next line could refer either to the Greek or the Persian fleet. Either they, and not the Greek fleet, put down the Asians or else they defeated the Asiatic ideas and not their physical force, but the second has a negative aspect which is not strictly applicable.

"The many-headed foam" seems at first simply to describe the sea, but the next line suggests that it is associated in some way with the "Asiatic vague immensities". "Foam" gives the impression of a formless, restless, insubstantial mass. "Many-headed" may imply that it includes many different ideas, but in any case the effect is like a turbulent crowd without clear purpose or direction. "Put off" also yields several meanings: "reject", "avoid or postpone", and "take off" (as clothes). The last carries a strong hint of Venus rising naked from the foam that also associates with the establishment of ideal beauty in the statues. Phidias created statues that "Gave women dreams and dreams their looking-glass": he gave the ideals fully human form that became the dreams of adult women and so were reflected in their lives. Thus, the idea of man's share in divinity reached maturity when man's passions could be fully realised in the human ideal. The ideal is not, as in the first stanza, something still abstract, whose imaginative reality must be supplied by human enthusiasm, but is an active part of human life.

The statue-theme undergoes a change in the third stanza, a metamorphosis that seems to proceed freely, and even apparently contradictorily, in time and space. "One image crossed the many-headed, sat Under the tropic shade" gives as a first meaning that one statue-image travelled in some way from Greece to Asia - since it crossed the "many-headed foam" between them. But it is evident that the repetition of this phrase is not purely gratuitous, or merely geographical: it was not Asia and Europe simply as geographical units that contested with one another, but as representing certain ideas. Thus, "crossed" must also

refer to those ideas and may suggest some combination of the two in which the form given to man's aspirations and self-understanding by the Greek artists and philosphy is joined to the consciousness of "vague immensities" belittling man's actions and desires.

This is described in the next lines. The statue's body matures into middle age, representing the development away from the physical and sexual ideal in man's conception of himself. It becomes a Buddha-like image which dissociates itself from the disturbances of active life and appears to dream of another, less ephemeral world. And since it expresses or creates the people's dreams, it implies that men's minds turned away from the world as happened in Europe in the Middle Ages. Hence the Middle Ages were also the middle age of man's self-understanding. This interpretation is supported by the lines

> ...Empty eyeballs knew
> That knowledge increases unreality, that
> Mirror on mirror mirrored is all the show.

The use of the mirror obviously refers back to the previous stanza: "Gave women dreams and dreams their looking-glass", and, less obviously, to the ending of the first: "live lips upon a plummet-measured face". The first stanza shows the confrontation of idealistic youth and abstract perfection of human type; and the second the mature woman facing and reflecting her own idealised form. The third stanza says that increased knowledge of the world only reveals increased ignorance, and is finally cancelled by an ultimate ignorance. "Empty eyeballs" emphasise the realisation that man will then not see the mirror of his dreams focussed in action in this world. Instead, he "sees" that there are two mirrors placed

opposite one another, producing an apparent infinitude of images which are really all reflections back and forth of one object, making up the "spectacle" of this world. For the Buddhist, the appearances of this world are mere reflections of a reality which we cannot see on earth, and if we wish to symbolise it we must remove as far as possible the qualities of this world:character, passion, sexuality, and all concepts of time and hence of action.

The changed aspect of the statue reflects this new attitude. It is static, unworried, blind to the exigencies of human life, "No Hamlet thin from eating flies". The contrast is between the contemplative who has dismissed the troubles of this life to concentrate on another, and the man caught in the world's dilemma, dwelling on his own buzzing thoughts, never able to accept fully the implications of a life beyond the grave, and yet not wholeheartedly committed to this life and so unable to act in it. "I eat the air, promise-crammed" says Hamlet (III, ii, 98).

Linked with Hamlet by her ambiguous name (which can apply either to a cat or to an old woman, probably through their frequent association but perhaps because it derives originally from "Grey Matilda"), Grimalkin may also during her life have "eaten flies".[1] Now, at the end of her life, she "crawls to Buddha's emptiness" of worldly characteristics because this has become the appropriate

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1 Grimalkin represents an aspect of human life and a state of mind, but not the type of god worshipped, as F. Wilson suggests (see p.80 below). She is part of the pattern of the developing life-cycle as it reflects the development of the central concept of man in the universe.

religious view for her now that her body, and the life of this world, are of no consequence. For her the world is no longer an arena for man's self-fulfilment but a place for self-effacement. Her position at the end of this stanza parallels that of the adolescents and the women in the earlier stanzas, reflecting as before a general development in man's conception of his life.

The phrase "the hour to bless" has at least two meanings. "Bless" can mean (i) to consecrate, (ii) to call holy or to adore, (iii) to invoke supernatural favour upon, (iv) to attribute good fortune to, (v) to make successful, happy or beatified. Of this selective list the first three all seem possible as applied to Grimalkin, the fourth is less likely, and the fifth may be appropriate to God or his representative. As often in Yeats, the phrase has a quality suggestive of a common saying without being identifiable as such, a subtle combination of the ordinary and the new. The strongest meaning which emerges from the context is, I think, that the time has arrived when the consecration of human life to a supernatural focus is to be recognised and celebrated. Thus, the hour has struck for Grimalkin to dedicate herself to some principle beyond this world, whether it is to another life or to a release from life. "Gong and conch" are instruments of call in Hindu and other Asian temples, but it seems likely that they were chosen mainly for their sound values.

Stanza four implies that Pearse's belief in Cuchulain and his hopeless fight for the Irish cause summoned up some thread of belief in the Irish people which was enough to persuade them to erect a statue of Cuchulain outside

the Dublin Post Office where the main battle was fought. Cuchulain is a particularly fitting figure, having once himself fought against the sea and having died fighting for his country. He is a half-legendary, half-mythological figure, a hero, and hence a manifestation of the divine in man. The representation of this quality in the artistic form suggests a relationship with the earlier statues, which is then stated explicitly: "We Irish, born into that ancient sect". This can only refer to the kind of wisdom evinced by the Pythagoreans, the only ancient sect that has been alluded to. There is some justification for the association with the Pythagoreans since the Irish monasteries retained the Greek-Neoplatonist influence of their original Christian conversion. The further association with the modern Irish is more tenuous, but it is suggested that the statue demonstrates that they intuitively possess a unifying and essentially religious attitude towards the universe.

Their innate understanding of the immanence of the divine in nature is opposed, as before, to the sea, representing the differentiating, rationalising attitude of the day. But now it is seen not merely as formless, but also as immediately threatening, in its rapid and haphazard self-reproduction; and this time it is victorious. The words "by its formless spawning fury wrecked" image the action of the sea, and are contrasted with the "intellect,...calculation, number, measurement" of the previous lines. "Thrown upon" is parallel to "put down" and "put off" in its position and ambiguity, but is noticeably passive in contrast. It can mean "at the mercy of", "hurled into", or "brought forth, dropped (as animals)". The last meaning provides the syntactical link

with "born into that ancient sect": the Irish belong by descent to the Pythagoreans, but they have been given birth to as an intellectual civilisation in the modern age.

This double notion of descent, as both lineage and downward movement, reappears, by implication, in the phrase "Climb to our proper dark". The paradox of ascending into darkness, usually associated with earth as opposed to heaven, with descent and death, parallels the defeats of Cuchulain and Pearse. The latter achieved a legendary status and at the same time pointed the way the Irish were to go by his belief in Cuchulain. He prefigured a rebirth of such belief, it is suggested, and the Irish must resume the simplicity and ignorance of their beginnings, and their mystic consciousness, their "proper dark". They must "climb" because an attempt to re-link man with the divine must involve an ascent. This contrasts with the ending of the first stanza, where the young people could go directly to the statue in the dark. The Irish have yet to achieve or must re-achieve that state.

The poem ends with a return to its beginning as it proposes man should do. The Irish must "trace The lineaments of a plummet-measured face": they must follow or discover the immanent form in the universe which relates man and the products of his mind in a unified design and copy it as in the statues. They may not yet kiss the form, nor model their lives on earth or their conceptions of a spiritual life on it, but must reach and feel with groping hands over the figure looming in the darkness. The Irish have gone through a ritual death in order to be reborn into "that ancient sect".

The tone of this last stanza, particularly of "this filthy modern tide", is strident and comes dangerously near to sentimentality because there is only barely enough in the poem to connect the Irish with the tradition of religious unity. There seems little reason for the sudden violence of the fifth and sixth lines, partly because the defeat of Pearse cannot be made clear by the tone of the first three lines (since in one sense this was not a defeat but the portent of a new birth). But the most important factor is that the helplessness of the Irish is given no really adequate imaginative ground. It is not helped by the generality of the opposing force, but, as with "Asiatic vague immensities", formlessness is not easy to make real through verbal imagery. England's reprehensible conduct towards Ireland is rightly unspecified so that it is seen to be only an example of this tide of formlessness. Formlessness is opposed to the sense of form which both mirrors and induces man's religious insights at all stages of its cyclical, organic process of birth, development and decay. The tide floods back and forwards, and the life of the idea occurs between its floods. This explains the adjective "filthy" because, although death and defeat is inevitable, it is continuously opposed to life and must be combated. Nevertheless, it does not fully vindicate its use in the poem since, despite the warning of the splitting-apart of the unity of the idea in the third stanza, the necessity of the defeat in the final stanza is not completely realised.

This poem has received a great deal of explication, some of which has already been dealt with in chapter two (pp.79-88). In connection with this, it may be noted that the discussion has not required any mention of Maud Gonne

(see note, p.84). Most of the comment begins from external material and thus returns this elaborately patterned poem to formlessness by ignoring the logic of the poem and imposing correlations made in different contexts. One passage which illustrates this particularly well is the comment in Yeats's Autobiographies (pp.141-2) on a portrait of William Morris:

> Its grave wide-open eyes, like the eyes of some dreaming beast, remind me of the open eyes of Titian's 'Ariosto', while the broad vigorous body suggests a mind that has no need of the intellect to remain sane, though it give itself to every fantasy: the dreamer of the Middle Ages. It is the 'fool of faery...wide and wild as a hill', the resolute European image that yet half remembers Buddha's motionless meditation, and has no trait in common with the wavering, lean image of hungry speculation, that cannot but because of certain famous Hamlets of our stage fill the mind's eye.

Because of the parallel description "dreamer of the Middle Ages" and the common quality of corpulence, Engelberg[1] assumes that the single image that crosses the many-headed is that of Morris. ~~despite the obvious contrast of "wide-open eyes" and "Empty eyeballs"~~. The multiple possibilities of the genitive link phrase "dreamer of the Middle Ages" must take some of the responsibility for this confusion, although the association with the woman of the second stanza dreaming her own ideal reflection and Buddha dreaming beyond this life clearly suggests the meaning "who dreamt the idea of the Middle Ages" as one reading. The meaning "a dreamer who lived in the Middle Ages" fits no appropriate statue-image and the possibility of some

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[1] Engelberg, p.192.

fat Medieval, Buddha-like person would first have to be a statue and secondly is not put forward by the poem and would have no logical place in its development. Morris, as someone fond of dreaming about the Middle Ages, is nowhere suggested by the poem and bears even less relationship to its ideas. Taken in conjunction with the meaning "dreamer of the idea of the Middle Ages", the analogy between the development of the religious idea and the pattern of human life provides a far more satisfying meaning for this phrase in the poem than does anything in the quotation although this is not wholly dissimilar in general meaning to part of the third stanza.

Commenting on the same passage, F.A.C. Wilson says that Hamlet and the fool of the Middle Ages are contrasted in the poem "with the objective Hamlet of the modern theatre, abstracted, unheroic and 'thin from eating flies'". Engelberg opposes this but he does so by adducing another passage, this time from Explorations (p.446), which discusses Hamlet as "a medieval man of action". He continues:

> Clearly Hamlet and his 'wavering, lean image' are not intended to serve as an entirely negative image juxtaposed to an entirely positive image of Morris. The 'action', 'visibility', 'energy' which Yeats praises so often are a part of the speculative man, at least at one point in his development. Morris...stands before Hamlet in that development,...resolute for action but still contemplative,....[1]

While this is partly true, since Hamlet represents another aspect of man's thinking at this period of the idea's

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[1] Engelberg, p.193.

development, the central concern of the stanza is not with kinds of action and meditation but with acceptance and non-acceptance of a particular view of man in the universe. There is no suggestion that the "round and slow...Dreamer" is in any way "resolute for action" or that we are to think of Hamlet-Grimalkin as praiseworthy for their activeness of mind.

Engelberg notes that he is "using aspects of the poem to serve my own development of the Yeatsian aesthetic", but he does give a reading of the poem and it is as often wrong as right, usually because of interpolations from elsewhere. He summarises the poem:

> 'The Statues' celebrates the single, conscious, countable and measurable image of art as it climbs out of the vast design of history - the tide of the engulfing flood - which it conquers. ...The re-integration of art and social life is the major theme of 'The Statues'.[1]

The first statement, like the rest of Engelberg's reading, largely ignores the final stanza, yet for the most part his explanation is accretive - the one image is said to embody all that he has discussed "from Pythagoras through Alexander, from Byzantium through the Renaissance", including all that is said in the many prose passages he quotes in connection with the poem. At the same time this huge and immensely complex panorama is said to be centred on the re-integration of art and social life. Although not an unworthy theme, it seems hardly equal to the philosophy of Pythagoras, the dreams of Buddha and the humanism of the Greeks. This explanation arises from an attempt to

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1 Engelberg, p.204.

interpret the appearance of a relationship between the young people and the statues in a poem which is otherwise seen, in the light of the prose, as dealing largely with the evolution of history in terms of art and the nature of various kinds of art. It seems unlikely that Yeats's aesthetic would be served by this partial understanding of his verse, in which it appears as a mere extension of various scattered elements of his prose.

So deeply encrusted with external quotations is the exegesis of this poem that even Rajan is unable to shake himself free and look squarely at the poem. He complains that the mythisising of the poem is not wholly successful.

> The imaginative logic of the poem does not permit it to define itself and the exterior connections needed for definition are personal rather than traditional. The Hamlet-Buddha-Medieval dreamer-Grimalkin complex receives little substantiation in anything the verse does, while the rhyming of 'fat' and 'sat' and the emphasis on fly-eating are scarcely successful as wit and are (it is to be hoped) not meant to be anything more.[1]

I hope my discussion of the poem has shown that the first sentence is not true. The second objection has rather more substance but, since understanding of the poem depends largely on the perception of its imaginative logic in the series of similar structures which comment upon one another, Rajan's statement is unacceptable. Nevertheless, it is true that the quality of the verse in this stanza is thinner, almost certainly as a result of the increasing complexity, and the simplicity of the language is perhaps

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1 Rajan, p.185.

a part of this effect. But the simple, clear rhyme-words, especially "fat" and "sat", slow down the movement by their very clarity and by the breaking-up of the clauses, imitating the metamorphosis of the statue. The long vowel in "slow" is also particularly effective.

Rajan's general comment that "the System has now come to provide not metaphors for poetry but an apparatus for fabricating poems"[1] is not justified, but the systematic nature of the poem's construction may provide some grounds for calling it an "apparatus". Yet the great range of reference and the daring of the symbolic design necessitate a firm and intricate supporting structure of this kind. The cyclic pattern is not connected with the "system" but is given a connection with ordinary knowledge through the analogy with the human life-cycle, and it is the determinism of this, rather than of the gyre-theory, as Graham Martin suggests,[2] against which the battle to create a relationship between man and the universe is fought. On the other hand, there is more justification for his complaint that there is an ambiguity between the determinism of the cycle and the moral protest at its implications in this poem than in "The Gyres", I believe, because the Irish are not sufficiently established as fighting for the concept before they are whirled helplessly into defeat, and the strong antagonism towards the formless sea also lacks previous support.

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1 Rajan, p.174.

2 Penguin Guide, vol. 7, p.183.

Finally, Whitaker's introduction of the "system" into an otherwise sensitive, though not uniformly accurate, reading[1] causes him to see the third stanza as the defeat because it presents the emergence of a spiritually primary civilisation. Although this is partly true, the stanza does not describe a defeat by formlessness. As Whitaker himself notes, there is an essential difference between formlessness and "Buddha's emptiness": chaos is not the same as nothing. The "one image" is blind but it sees or reflects a clear vision of man in relationship with divinity. The old woman is dehumanised, as Whitaker says, but not by her cat-name or by her religion but by her age, when the physical ideal, the anthropocentric view, no longer has relevance. This is the end of the cycle before formlessness returns. The major theme of the poem is not the development of the view of man as fully representative of the divine, although this is the highest point for wholeness of life on earth, the point at which formlessness reaches it lowest ebb, but the development through the concept of representative form of a view of man in some relationship to the universe and the divine.

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1 Whitaker, pp.235-245.

# CONCLUSIONS

The argument of this thesis has been that a poem can yield a whole of meaning only if its unity be considered to lie in the work itself and not in any external context, and that under these conditions Yeats's later poetry does not require the support of an elaborate framework of background knowledge.

Poetry presents the perception of form or meaning in experience, reproducing the relationship of subjective and objective worlds that occurs in the act of symbol-formulation. To do so it exploits the multiple associations and connotations of words, in contrast to analytical discourse in which words are used with single, fixed references. In this way poetry depends on the experience of the community preserved in the complexity of the language, but it renews the acts of meaning evoked by the words by placing them in new, unique relationships. Through these relationships the poem creates its own meaning although depending on previously existing meanings.

The reader is induced to re-enact in his mind the process of the formulation of meaning. To create a unified experience, therefore, references to meanings outside the poem must be accessible. Alternatively, such references must be reapplied to the context if they are to contribute to the poem's meaning as distinct from any broader pattern of thought. If external references are forced into the poem, its unity is destroyed and it appears fragmentary. This applies to everything outside the words

of the poem: the author's prose or other poems, pictures, doctrines or philosophies related to the poem or espoused by the poet, and traditional symbolisms. All add to the suggestion of the poem only insofar as they are assimilated into its meaning-process.

Critics who assume that Yeats's poetry refers to a private system of ideas or language and apply this system to the poems do not allow the poems to produce their own meanings. Only if a close reading of the text taking note of all ambiguities, symbolic or metaphoric implications, and internal structural relationships does not yield a satisfactory meaning, should the poem be concluded to be dependent on an external structure. Similarly, the poems cannot be justified by placing them in a larger context, such as a book of poems, unless it can be clearly demonstrated that they are all relevant to and part of that context, and that the context itself acts as a satisfactory whole of meaning.

The readings of the poems in chapter three indicate that the poems can stand alone provided they are taken as wholes. In these readings speculation is kept to a minimum to ensure that the poem's own statement does not become confused with extraneous matter. This is not to dispute that the poems may deserve readings that probe more deeply into the ideas that appear in the poems; but first these ideas must be determined, since all such discussion must both spring from and be referred back to the poem if the poem itself, as a work of art, is under consideration.

Yeats's style in the latest poems is declamatory and prophetic, but all the poems dealt with are concerned with the conditions of human life, and particularly with the contrast between man's spirituality and his physical existence, and his search for reconciliation or understanding of his situation through the medium of art as symbol. The conscious symbolism of style reflects this search for meaning, and there is therefore a unity throughout the poems from the details of style to the major units of thought.

In keeping with the conscious symbolism there is a deliberate tautness of style. The image-symbols are organised with lucidity and precision into the complex patterns of ambiguities, contrasts and parallelisms of sound and syntax, image and rhythm, that repeat the reflexive process of symbolic interaction. The group-poems reflect this on a larger scale, each section contributing to the whole, not, generally, in a steady progression but in a series of states which interact to produce an overall development of thought.

Conscious symbolism reflects a personal search for understanding of man's relationship to the universe, but if the fusion of subject and object is achieved the resulting verse is not necessarily subjective and self-isolating as some critics suggest. Nevertheless, there is a danger of its becoming merely subjective if the symbolic process is not made active in the reader's mind. Then the poem becomes mere statement and this is naturally attributed by the reader not to the poem but to the author's person. There are some points in these later poems where this begins to happen. Yeats's attitude to the "Irishry" may

be accepted as referring to all who maintain a unified outlook on life, natural symbolists, but is established as such more by accretion in poems and essays than in individual poems, where it tends to appear idiosyncratic. In itself, however, this cannot destroy the unity of a poem such as "The Statues" because the major theme of the poem is not idiosyncratic but universal.

Dual voices and polarities of all kinds in these poems reflect the internal dissidence intrinsic to man. Possibly the most important of these polarities is that of determinism and willed acceptance. The poems dramatise both the debate and the achievement of acceptance and understanding through the exertion of the will. If the poems had simply developed a symbolic image that resolved the antitheses, the element of will would be present only implicitly in the artistic achievement. But the poems repeatedly stress this willed acceptance because it is this that opposes the apparently meaningless, pre-determined pattern of life and death. Only when it has been achieved can the liberation into joy occur. In "The Gyres" this element is directly represented by aesthetic distance in art which is the achievement of the artist's style, but it is implicit also in the integration of form and subject in the other poems.

The subject of these poems is more than just the symbolic process: it is that process as constitutive of man's knowledge. Art stands between the spiritual and the physical as the symbolic process is the link between man and his environment, thus art is both method and example of the search for unity. Yeats's critics have tended to assume that his art is merely the expression of a unity

already found by the poet, but the integrity of meaning and form found in the readings of the poems testifies that Yeats was able to create an objective unity in the poems.

Yeats's metaphysical and philosophical concepts do not make the poems unduly obscure or private because where they appear in the poetry they are derived from general knowledge and set in carefully controlled contexts. They lose their connection with ordinary thought, however, when they are extracted from the poems and referred to less restrained contexts such as A Vision or Yeats's other prose. A Vision in particular should be taken as Yeats said he took it, as a "stylistic arrangement of experience". Its symbols, like those of any other system or context, are active only within their particular context and must be re-activated if they are introduced into new artistic contexts. Yeats was aware of the nature of symbol in poetry and the same condition applies to his verse as to poetry in general: no importation of external materials can irradiate the poems with the artist's intention if they do not enact their own meaning. And if the poems have this integrity, they will themselves determine the relevance of external ideas.

The poems by Yeats studied here reveal this quality. Yeats does not rely on the reader to know the symbolic meanings of words he uses literally, rather, he relies on the reader to know the commonly accepted meanings of the words and creates symbolic suggestion by their relation to their contexts. These poems are fully self-consistent. Their occasional weakness arises from the maintenance of a consistently high level of thought, whose universality, springing from a single mind, falters at times. This may

be partly the result of his isolation from much of the thought of his period, but certainly his esoteric interests do not destroy the ability of his verse to reach other minds, providing they are prepared to give it the attention it demands as poetry, and deserves as great poetry. Often brilliantly intense, the poems dramatise and objectify into universal experience the artist's search for an assurance of mind that can rest in his own being and in the world as it presents itself to him, and can yet go beyond this to uphold those standards of life that most enhance the embattled life of men: vigour of mind and body, delight in life, fear of what is greater than man and the concept of honour to set against the fear. Comfort and escape are foreign to him. His constant argument is, that because there is no absolute progress but a determined, cyclic pattern ending in defeat for civilisations as for each individual life, man must use his will to live as finely as possible. Art, for Yeats, is emblem, symbol and mode of expression, celebrating in all these aspects the possibilities of life and drawing into a meaningful form the disparate elements of man's conscious being.

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